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JASON JARRETT

being

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the Fort Hays Kansas State College in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Science

by

Jessie Leshner, A.B.

Fort Hays Kansas State College

Hays, Kansas

Date July 18, 1956 Approved Ralph V. Coder

Ralph V. Coder  
Chairman Graduate Council

## JASON JARRETT

### PREFACE

Jason Jarrett's horse single footed lightly along the trail that led from his Circle C Ranch to the handful of houses that bore the name of Vale. Though it was spring and the hills along the river and the prairies beyond were bright with flowers and the meadow larks were singing their hearts out in the grass, Jason was in a pleasant mood. He was never in a pleasant frame of mind when he thought of Vale or

This is a story of some of the people who lived on great ranches during the early days of Kansas history. With the exception of Fort Hays, all places described are imaginary; and all persons mentioned are purely fictional and bear no resemblance to anyone living or dead.

He found the very site on which the shabby little town squatted and he still felt that he had been cheated out of a large acreage by the promoters who had laid out the town and sold lots to the inhabitants. But there was nothing he could do about it, since he had no legal title to the land, so he contented himself with hating the place and only necessity forced him to go there for supplies rather than to Fort Hays, a good thirty miles distant.

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Not five years before he had felt that he owned the very site on which the shabby little town squatted and he still felt that he had been cheated out of a large acreage by the promoters who had laid out the town and sold lots to the inhabitants. But there was nothing he could do about it, since he had no legal title to the land, so he contented himself with hating the place and only necessity forced him to go there for supplies rather than to Fort Hays, a good thirty miles distant.

Today he needed sugar and flour and nails and he thought ruefully of Daddy Harl's spotted tabby that divided her nap time between the boxes that held dried fruits and the open



barrels where the sugar and flour were kept.

As Jason neared the store he noted that there were more than the usual number of saddle horses tied to the hitch rack and before dropping his reins to the ground, he wondered idly what the occasion was. When he entered the door, there was Daddy measuring out dried beans for Mrs. Thomas Patton and behind the stacked-up packing cases that served to separate the post office from the store, was a feminine form that made even Jason, who ordinarily appeared indifferent to women, take a second look.

Women were scarce in the new, raw country and any unfamiliar face would have occasioned comment, but this girl was something special, and Jason proved that he thought so by purchasing as much merchandise as he could well carry home on one horse and by staying to gossip awhile with the ne'er-do wells who hung idly about the store.

Janie Ferris was the granddaughter of Daddy Harl's third wife and, being an orphan, she had lately come from Ohio to make her home with Daddy and Mrs. Naylor. Mrs. Naylor had been the lady's name before she married Daddy Harl and since that was what he always called her; so did everybody else.

As Jason rode back home, Daddy's words rang in his head, "My granddaughter's come out to Kansas to live. Goin' to stay here with me and Mrs. Naylor till Spring anyways,

Goin' to teach school out here. Taught a year back in Ohio and liked it fine, but her grandma's awful lonesome here without any of her folks, so she coaxed Janie to come out. Well, it's all right so long as she helps out in the store. It don't hurt the trade a bit. Sold more chawin' terbaccer and horehound drops and such like since she's been here than I ever have. You oughta get you a woman, Jason. You've batched it a long time. Whyn't you look Janie over? She's a good cook, kinda skinny, but a good cook."

"I've got a cook," Jason had answered shortly and walked out. He was embarrassed for the girl and hoped that Daddy's voice hadn't carried to the other side of the store where she was weighing out oatmeal for Mrs. Fitzpatrick. It made him wince to think that she might have heard. A good many years had passed since any woman had interested him as Janie had and he called himself a dozen kinds of a fool to be bowled over by a smiling pink and white face topped by a pompadour of bronze colored hair and lighted with a pair of deep blue eyes. Thinking it over as he rode along he decided that it must have been her eyes that stirred him so. They were, he thought, exactly the color of glass that has lain long under a desert sun.

He wished that he had never seen her, but in the days that followed, he found himself thinking of supplies he needed to buy and wondering if perhaps Daddy Harl didn't have

them in stock.

So it was that the sand in the streets of Vale was frequently stirred by the hoofs of Jason's saddle horse as he single footed into town to purchase staples for the ranch. And always he hoped that it might be Janie who would wait on him and that there would not be many customers in the store so that he would have time for conversation as he chose his groceries.

And usually it was Janie who came forward to take his order; and so smitten was Jason by the girl that he never wondered why this should be so, never realized that Daddy was anxious to have his wife's granddaughter make a favorable impression on the most eligible rancher within a radius of twenty miles.

"My groceries are just as good as what they've got at Fort Hays," he told Mrs. Naylor. "Jason 'ud just as well buy here as anywhurs, and if our Janie can land him, so much the better. Get her some new clothes. Spruce her up. All these young bucks hangin' around, she's gonna get married anyway, so it had just as well be Jason. He needs a wife and we can use the money he'll spend. The bigger his family, the more groceries he'll buy and he'd just as well get them from me. A funny thing, him never marryin'. He must be close to forty and as far as I know he's never gone with anyone since he's been around here, and that's quite a spell."



"How long has he been here? Where did he come from? Hasn't he ever been married?" Mrs. Naylor thought she should have the complete pedigree of the man she was sure Janie would be able to pick off.

"As to whur he come from, I don't think anybody knows for sure. Jason can give some mighty short answers when he wants to. He sounds like an Easterner, but--".

"An Easterner? Didn't everybody out here come from the East?"

"Well, I mean from the fur East. Pennsylvania or maybe New Jersey, and yet he's got a kinda southern twang, too. There's a lot about Jason that most people haven't figured out. As to how long he's been here, I'd say he must have come in the early seventies, maybe right after the War. I think he was a scout at the Fort from what I've heard him say. That's probably how he got a hold of all that land along the river. His cattle used to graze all the way from here to Victoria, they tell me, before them damned Englishmen settled in there. About him ever bein' married, I couldn't say. I told you he never goes with anyone, but I don't mean he doesn't know anything about women. He's got a rovin' eye, if you ask me, and I think he likes 'em better married."

Mrs. Naylor was all agog. "What do you mean? What married women?"

Daddy chose to be enigmatic. "I ain't namin' any

names, but when certain men around here make day-long trips to town, Jason's horse can be seen tied to their hitch racks a good part of the time. I suppose he wouldn't want a woman to be lonesome while her man was away. Maybe he's just lookin' after his cattle and seein' if any of 'em are in the water holes and so forth and stops in to pass the time of day with his neighbors. The women like him better than the men. I can't hardly stand him myself. Always used to think my groceries wasn't good enough for him. A lookin' down his nose at my dried apples. A course they had a few worms in 'em. Show me some dried fruit that hasn't. Oh well, when you've been out here as long as I have you'll know all the gossip."

"Well, tell me. What is all the gossip? If my granddaughter's going to marry the man, I'd just as well know everything about him."

"Mrs. Naylor, don't count your chickens before the eggs are pipped. Your granddaughter hasn't married Jason Jarrett yet. A many a woman has set her cap for the man but they ain't married him. Jason's wary. Lots a' women's tried to get their hooks into him, but no luck. He just likes his women married. They're safer that way. Women are funny. Jason's got all that spread of land and all them cattle and any woman, it looks like, would just give her eye teeth to get her hands on his property and never give a damn how he

come by it."

Mrs. Naylor had to know all of this, but she realized that Daddy was a cantankerous old cuss and that she would have to squeeze him gently.

"You mean he's dishonest?"

"I mean he's a damn' scalawag. He stole practically everything he's got. You ought to hear what a fellow in Fort Hays told me. Fellow used to herd cattle for Jason. He said that Jason used to make the trip to Texas. There he'd pick up a little bunch of Longhorns for practically nothing and head north on the trail with them. Then at night he and his riders would steal everything they could get a rope on, mark their ears, slit their dewlaps, brand them through a wet sack to make the brand look old, and turn them in with the rest of the herd. By the time they got home to the ranch, he'd have a sizeable bunch and at no cost but the men's wages. And that ain't all. How did he get all that land? He cusses homesteaders long and loud, but it was his riders that homesteaded quarter section after quarter section along the river and let him have it for enough money to go on a good jag. They took timber claims, too. Stuck cottonwood and willow sprouts in the ground and went in and swore for each other that they was ready to prove up on their timber claims. Timber claims! The dam' sprouts was dead before they got to the land office."



"Well, I don't know whether I want Janie to even go with a man like that, let alone marry him."

"Well, as you may have noticed, Mrs. Naylor, she ain't married him yet, nor gone with him any, either. But the way he hangs around the store, I think she can. And I don't believe you'd have to worry about him gettin' her into trouble either. Jason ain't lettin' any woman get her hooks into him that way. He's too cagey for that. And I wouldn't worry about him bein' a crook. Any man would of done the same things, if he'd had a chance. Jason's just long headed, that's all. He don't talk much and all he thinks of is makin' money. Well, there ain't no use bein' persnickety about where money comes from, if you have a chance to get your hands on it yourself. Not these days."

Mrs. Naylor didn't ask Daddy to amplify his remark about "these days," but started trying to make her conscience behave itself.

"I wouldn't want Janie to marry him, no matter how much money he's got, unless she really loved him," she mused. "And I don't hardly see how she could help loving him. There's something about him, when he gets close to you, that just sets you to tingling."

"He don't affect me none that way," the old man snorted. "Damned outlaw, that's what he is. And just remember, you're a married woman, Mrs. Naylor."

"I ain't apt to forget," Mrs. Naylor answered his retreating back as he stomped into the store to relieve Janie so that she might come in and eat her dinner.

"Well, Jason's buyin' more goods all the time," Daddy reported that evening when he came into the back room for his supper. "Never sends that cook of his up any more. Comes himself now."

"But he's never asked Janie to go with him. I don't understand it," Mrs. Naylor worried.

"Where would they go? Nothin' goin' on but church, and Jason don't go to church. Somebody'll have to get up a dance and invite Jason special. He goes to all the dances."

This brought up a moot question between Mrs. Naylor and Daddy and she gave him a baleful glance.

"No use lookin' at me like that, Mrs. Naylor. What the hell do you think I put up a two-story building for anyway? Just to let the top story set there for nothing? I let 'em have church in there every Sunday they can find a preacher and Sunday school any time they want to and never charge a cent. But there's goin' to be dances up there, too, to bring in a little money and if it makes too much noise and knocks down too much dust, you'll just have to stand for it. Remember, them people buy a lot of goods on dance nights. In fact, I think there'll be a dance up there every Saturday night from now on, Mrs. Naylor. It's good for business."

"Who's goin' to clean the place up before church on Sunday mornings, I'd like to know?" Mrs. Naylor questioned belligerently.

"I don't give a damn whether it's cleaned up or not. What I'm thinkin' of is the money I can get out of it."

"You won't be any money ahead, if the best people in this community quit trading with you," Mrs. Naylor countered smartly.

"Mrs. Naylor, the next time I subscribe to a matrimonial bureau to find me a wife, I'm gonna ask for one that won't know so damn' much about runnin' my business for me. You've been out here less than a year and you start tellin' me who are the best people and how, if I do this or if I don't do that, they won't trade with me. Let 'em haul their eggs and butter thirty odd miles to Fort Hays every week. Who do you think they are anyway? The Fitzpatricks, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Patton, the Bells, the Williamses, the Dales and Burnses, maybe the Spencers and the rest of them. Do they invite you to any of the parties they give? Have they done anything for Janie? My hall is good enough for them to have church and Sunday school in scot free, but they won't come to a dance there. That is, the women won't. I'll bet the men would, if their wives would let them. Anyway the single ones do, and they ain't above drinkin' a little corn likker, too, between sets. And now about that liquor. It's all



drunk outside the hall. That's a rule and I make 'em stick to it."

"Yes, out on the landing and on the stairs," Mrs. Naylor, now thoroughly incensed, answered sarcastically.

"And let me tell you that, if I had all this to do over again, I would never have come out to this God forgotten country where there's nothing but cattle and horses and--mules."

"Well, you're here now, so you'd better make the best of everything; and that goes for dancing, too. I think Janie'll like a dance. I'm going to find out now."

\* \* \*

Janie Ferris was eighteen and loved life in a quiet, happy way. She was modest and refined as befitted a young woman who had grown up in a small Ohio town and whose paternal grandfather had been a Presbyterian minister. She thought Daddy Harl was exceedingly kind to take her into his home and she did not think that she was being exploited when she worked long hours in the store for her board and clothes.

"I think a dance would be fun, Daddy; a lot of fun," she told the old man gaily when he asked her opinion. She was thinking of the ruffled pink dress she would wear and of the fun she had had at home when she went to dances with her father.

"All right then, Saturday night it is. If Sam Helcher or Bob Sterns comes in and I'm out, call me. I always let them get up the dances and I charge them ten dollars for the use of the hall. Whatever they take in above that is theirs. Jason'll probably be in between now and then. Be sure to tell him about it."

Mention of Jason brought the hot blood to Janie's face and she turned quickly to straighten some bolts of cloth on the shelves. The sly old man noticed, but made no comment. Janie was kicking herself mentally to think what a fool she had let herself become over a man who came in to buy groceries at least twice a week, but who had never once asked her to go for even a buggy ride all summer.

"What do I see in him anyway?" she thought restlessly. "I wish I could have stayed at home. There's no use in thinking about a man who doesn't show any courting spirit at all. Whatever do I see in him?"

What she saw in him was enough to stir the blood of any ordinary woman. Jason was more than six feet tall, his hair was dark and wavy and, whereas the majority of the men in the early eighties wore either a beard or a moustache, his face was clean shaven and, though he was nearing forty, he hardly showed it. He had the springy step of a man in his twenties, an unlined face, and the assurance that came with experience and the possession of unlimited means. He knew

his power over women and it gave him a certain gratification. His black eyes looked out on life with quiet amusement. He was not vain of his manly charms nor of his worldly possessions, but he liked living with them and his satisfaction gave a peculiar grace and sauvity to his speech and movements. He was shrewd, intelligent, unscrupulous, far sighted, self-centered. His thoughts and hopes were tied up with Jason Jarrett, and to hell with the rest of the world.

\* \* \*

For days Daddy had been turning over in his mind the plans for the dance. He knew that he could expect a crowd and he hoped that by making it an invitation affair he could have fewer of the less desirable element. This class of people formed a minority in the community, but they were still to be reckoned with. They were men and women, mostly young, who thought that because an affair was a dance given in a public hall and because the men were required to pay for tickets, anyone who had fifty cents could come and bring his pocket flask.

Daddy had no special objection to a man's drinking liquor, if he didn't drink more than he could carry gracefully, and if he didn't make a nuisance of himself; but it was this undesirable element who did just that. They became



noisy, cocky, sweaty, and the floor manager often found it necessary to ask some of them to leave. So, during the week, Daddy discreetly mentioned that there would be a dance in his hall the following Saturday night.

The wives and daughters of the wealthy ranchers wouldn't have dreamed of attending a public dance in Daddy's hall, but the young men of good families came. Most of them showed their disdain of the place and the crowd by leaving early, but some of them with better manners stayed until "Home, Sweet Home" was played at an early hour on Sunday morning.

Jason liked to dance; it was his only form of relaxation. And when Daddy told him about the affair on the coming Saturday, he said he would be there. He naturally supposed that Janie would come and he looked forward to the event with considerable anticipation. As he rode his horse at a singlefoot toward Vale that Saturday evening, he found himself wondering what it would be like to hold her in his arms and waltz around the hall with her. He hoped the music would be good and that there would not be an over supply of men as there usually was at these shindigs.

When he arrived at the store, he found the place brightly lighted and lanterns hanging at the top and bottom of the outside stairs that led to the hall above.

Janie, clad in the pink ruffled dress, was at the

counter waiting on customers. Though the dress was merely cotton percale, the style and color were exactly suited to her and she made a pretty picture as she sliced off chewing tobacco and weighed out candy to the young bloods who came in before going up to the dance.

Daddy's hall was about thirty feet long and some twenty feet wide. It was long enough for two sets of dancers to go through the mazes of the quadrilles that were so popular.

Sam Helcher, a tall, gaunt man with a drooping moustache, was floor manager and Bob Sterns called the dances. Sam Helcher's brother John played a fiddle and Manohah Radford whanged away on a guitar. The music left considerable to be hoped for, but it was the best obtainable and, truth to tell, most of the dancers were used to little better.

Several young men had asked Janie if they could take her to the dance, but she had refused in the hope that Jason might ask her and she was angry and chagrined when the very evening of the dance arrived and he still had not asked her if she would go with him.

"I can't make him out," she told Mrs. Naylor when she went into the back room for a last look in the mirror. "He was just now down there and he never said a word about my going with him. For that I don't think I'll give him a single dance."

"I don't believe I would refuse him, if he asks,"

Mrs. Naylor cautioned. "That's considered an insult out here. You don't refuse a dance to a decent man, if you haven't promised it to someone else, and then you tell him you're sorry and that he can have the next one. He's so peculiar he might never pay you any more attention. Mighty independent is Mr. Jason Jarrett with women falling all over him. He does seem to like you, though, the way he comes in the store and stays around and talks to you so much."

Janie was pink with anger and humiliation because she had no one to go upstairs to the dance with; so when she went back into the store and Sid White, a personable young homesteader, asked her to go up with him, she readily assented. And, since she had gone to the dance with him, Sid considered her his girl for at least that evening and monopolized as many dances as he could.

"Remember Janie, you're my girl," he told her on the way up. "I get the first dance, the last one and first chance at all the others."

He was a pleasant, good-looking young fellow, he had helped Janie out of a bad spot and she had no wish to make him uncomfortable, so she gave him as many dances as he asked for and pretended not to see Jason when he looked her way.

And Jason looked toward her rather often as the evening proceeded without his having had even one dance with her. He had danced at least once with nearly all the girls



and young married women, but toward midnight he quit dancing and offered to play the fiddle while John Helcher danced with his wife.

The tunes Jason played were new to most of the dancers, though they held a haunting familiarity, and they were played with a surprising amount of vivacity by a man who appeared slow and deliberate in all of his movements. When a waltz was called, Janie had opportunity to watch the fingers of one hand slide over the strings while the other handled the bow in long graceful sweeps. She felt a rippling thrill as the music stirred her blood and, as she watched over her partner's shoulder, Jason raised his eyes and met hers in a long look. A rare smile lit his face and soon afterward he handed the violin back to John Helcher and was bowing in front of Janie to ask her for a dance.

Janie had to concede that Jason's dancing was a success. He led her through the figures of a waltz with amazing smoothness, his arm about her waist was placed with just the right amount of pressure, and he held her hand firmly. When the dance was ended, he returned her to her seat beside Sid White, thanked her formally, left the hall, and rode home under the summer stars.

"You don't do that again, Jason my boy," he told his reflection in the mirror next morning as he shaved. "You stay away from that store from now on and quit mooning around

over pretty girls, or you'll get yourself involved in a peck of half-bushels and you'll have yourself a time getting out. Just remember, there's not a thing you don't know about women--the good ones and the bad ones. You don't need any more experience. What you need is to look after your business and tend to your ranch. You've got a comfortable house and a good cook; and you don't want any more women messing up your life."

He went to the farthest east room of the long stone bunk house to eat the breakfast prepared by the cook he had so recently bragged about; but the food might as well have been sawdust between his teeth. He kept seeing a figure in bright pink ruffles reflected in the glass of the window and the other men at the table filled him with nausea. The whole bunk house reeked with the smell of their stinking feet and had it been any day but Sunday, he would have ordered them to clean the place up.

\* \* \*

The fall of the year can be beautiful on the high plains and this year it was. The cottonwoods along the Saline were a vivid yellow and the elms turned to russet. Sumac on the hillsides was crimson and the tall bluestem was a deep rose. The fall flowers flaunted pink, blue, and yellow in the draws, spiders spun webs that glinted silver in

the sunshine, and over all hung the golden haze of autumn.

The busiest season of the year came on at the Circle C and Jason and his riders were rounding up sleek cattle, separating calves from cows, bringing steers from the range to the home place, cutting out the fat steers to ship, getting the work done up before winter. Jason worked long days with the others, then took the trip to Kansas City with the cattle.

"Going to have me a time," he told Joe Osborne, his foreman. "May be gone two weeks. Look after things while I'm away and you can go down with the next bunch."

But the fun he had had on former occasions lacked its usual savor and he was ready to come home in three days.

"Things are getting tame in Kansas City," he told Joe. "You go on down, but you won't have any fun."

"Had just as much fun as I ever did in K. C.," Joe reported upon his return. "You must be in love. What happened anyway that you don't go up to the store any more? Did she give you the mitten?"

"I guess I don't know what you're talking about," Jason told him mildly. "You and Shorty get the boys out and round up everything and bring them in along the river. We're going to have an early winter. And when you get that done, throw a fire guard around section 19. There just might come a prairie fire up that draw from the south and burn up some



winter pasture."

The last part of this order smoothed the smile from Joe's face and set him to swearing fervently, but Jason was obdurate. He insisted that the fire guard must be plowed and that he would entrust the work to no one but Joe. It meant walking behind a breaking plow four miles; around and around a section of land as the plow tore through the tough roots of the prairie grass; and it would give Joe something to think about besides Jason's private life.

Jason often wondered if it were possible to push the faithful Joe too far. The two had been friends since the time they were sent out on a scouting expedition from Fort Hays and had been the only ones of the band to escape from the Indians. Each had credited the other with saving his life and felt he owed him a debt of gratitude.

Joe had not Jason's business ability. He would waste his money at the gaming table or fritter it away on loose women and when it was gone he would have no regrets. But he was a faithful and trustworthy friend and Jason felt he could leave the ranch in no better hands when it was necessary that he go away on business.

At one time Jason had thought briefly of taking Joe in as his partner. That was when Jason, out scouting, had first laid eyes on what was later to become the Circle C Ranch. He had ridden northeast from the Fort in search of

Indian signs and coming up over a bluff beheld the Saline River in its summer beauty. The floor of the valley presented an expanse of waving grass and the herds of buffalo were sleek with fat. He thought of what cattle might look like if they were to pasture there, and the germ of an idea was born. When his enlistment was completed he set out to materialize the plans that he had laid during the preceding two years.

Jason's plan included Joe and the two arrived at the Saline in the fall of 1872. There was barely time to throw up a shelter before cold weather set in, but they managed to erect a fairly presentable dug-out on Jason's homestead. Joe's claim was farther down the river and his dug-out, when finally built, was much less pretentious; but it scarcely mattered since they intended to live in the one on Jason's filing. This dug-out was always Jason's pride. It stood on a rise above the river and the spring, that flowed from the foot of the hill into the river. A small grove of cottonwoods were just behind it and it was in this grove that Jason intended to erect his ranch buildings. The bluffs along the stream would furnish shelter for cattle until sheds were built.

At present, Jason's herd consisted of the one milk cow he had bought from a settler near Fort Hays and in later years when he knew that people accused him of being a

cattle thief and worse, he would stoutly maintain that he "got his start honest."

Jason always did things in a large way and his dug-out was more spacious than most. There were two rooms. The large one in front was the kitchen and the back room was a bedroom. Over the door at the front Joe and he fastened the head of a great bull buffalo which they had shot and at the back its tail waved gaily from the ridgepole.

Jason liked good food and in order to have it he had to cook it himself. So it was Joe's duty to chop wood, carry water, milk the cow and make the endless trips to the Fort for supplies. Joe often begged Jason to go with him on these lonesome trips, but Jason always feared that something would happen to their holdings if both of them left the place. However, he did offer to take turns driving the long miles alone and it was on one of these trips to town that he acquired Tommy Murphy.

Tommy was a hotel cook and a good one, but he had made such a bad name for himself up and down the railroad that he had become unemployable. No owner of an eating establishment could afford to hire a cook who got drunk on an average of twice a week.

When Jason met Tommy on the streets of Fort Hays that eventful day, Tommy was recovering from one of his more sodden drunks. He was broke and craving liquor. He stopped



Jason and begged for money like a common panhandler. Jason was not one to part with cash without getting value received, and the idea struck him that here was the man who could keep house for him and Joe and relieve them of time consuming chores about the place.

Tommy was nearing sixty and of late years he had become an habitual drunkard but Jason figured that, if he were miles from the liquor traffic, there might be some hope for him. The two men struck a bargain over a bottle of good whiskey and the first square meal Tommy had eaten in a week. Jason agreed to take the cook out to the ranch and pay him a fair wage and Tommy was allowed to have whiskey, but not to get drunk. The agreement worked out well enough; Tommy was not only a good cook but a hard worker and Joe and Jason were free to work outdoors at making a pole corral, building sheds, and quarrying stone for the barn and bunkhouse that were to be built later. Jason was getting ready for the herds of cattle that he planned on owning in coming years.

When Spring came, the corral and cattle sheds were finished and a great pile of stone had been quarried for the bunkhouse and barn.

"Looks like the cattle come first around here, but when do we get them?" Joe wanted to know.

"We'll get that bunkhouse and barn out of the way first," Jason told him. "Good cattle take good care and that

means men and horses. I'll go into the Fort tomorrow and see if I can find a stone mason. You and I can throw poles and sod together, but if we started out with stone the dam' thing would probably fall in on us."

"Looks like you're putting a devil of a lot of money into this place before you'll get any out of it. Sometimes I wonder if you're made of money. I know you can spread a dollar farther than anybody else but sometime that belt around your middle will surely go dry." Joe was trying to get a slant on how much cash Jason had left; but the tight-mouthed Jason only answered, "I gave up more than you would ever believe for the money I've got in that belt, and how I spend it is my business." It irked him to have Joe make references to the money belt he wore, not only because it was dangerous in that raw country to carry an amount of money, but because he felt that Joe invited a confidence as to where the money came from and he had no intention of telling.

"Well, I hope them fifty dollar gold pieces hold out till this shebang gets going--or have you got a mint around here?" was Joe's rejoinder.

Jason held his temper and answered reasonably, "It's like this, Joe, of course, it takes money to start this place out and if I don't make a go of it, I stand to lose everything I've spent here. But this is the way I figure--get all the buildings up and then buy good cattle and take

good care of them. I may have to use some longhorn cows, but I want better stock than that, if I can afford it, and good bulls are the answer. I plan to get some from old George Grant. If he won't sell them at a price I can afford, we'll steal them and in a few years we'll be raising black Angus cattle. They're tough as whang leather from what I've seen. We won't exactly steal the bulls; we'll just drive them over here until after my cows are bred and if he finds out about it, he can come after them and we'll pretend they're strays. He won't believe it, he'll always know we drove them off, but we won't admit anything. At least we won't, if we can get them over here some dark night without anybody seeing us. Joe, if you want to strike out for yourself, go ahead. I like having you here, but I wouldn't want to ask you to stay when you can do better for yourself."

"You know dam' well, Jason, that I haven't got any money and that I never will have. You know I waste the wages you pay me on women and wine and cards and that I always will. You're stuck with me and Tommy the rest of your life. Now if you'll quit talking about throwing me out, I'll stop mentioning them gold pieces."

Jason had a tender place in his heart for his few friends and he knew that he never wanted to part with Joe. Their natures were nothing alike. Joe would never own anything more than a horse, a saddle, and the clothes on his



back, whereas Jason had the instincts of an entrepreneur. He had spent some time on the rich farms east of the Mississippi, he knew how to handle stock and he realized that here on the plains he could live a carefree life in the great outdoors and become wealthy doing it. His mind was always busy with ways and means of accumulating worldly goods. In fact, he couldn't remember when it hadn't been. All his life he had wanted to own things, to have a great deal of money, to be powerful and influential. He was willing to work hard to achieve his ends, to do without present pleasures, to look ahead and make plans.

Jason had a dream of a ranch with miles of plains and rolling hills covered with sleek black cattle and gaited horses. The ranch was bisected from east to west by the small, shining stream that furnished water and shade for his herds and above the stream among the scattering of cottonwoods would set his ranch buildings. The long stone bunkhouse, the octagon shaped barn with the mangers arranged in the center, the corrals and cattle sheds; and south of them and nearer the river, the great, square, two-story stone house with wide porches on three sides, a tree shaded terrace on the north and wide lawns that sloped down to the river. He could see the long French windows that opened from the sitting room onto the south porch, the curved open stairway and the fireplace, the front doorway with its gracious

entrance. But there were no people in his house, though it was furnished completely. It stood empty, desolate, and it was this part of the dream that Jason didn't like. Try as he would he could not fit Joe, Tommy and himself into the house, he could only stand on the outside and view it. Joe with his long plainsman's haircut, his squinting grey eyes, his old slouch hat and pot-bellied Tommy with his shining bald head were not meant for the house; so for long years they lived in the bunkhouse. Jason's room with its private entrance was at the west end and Joe and Tommy shared a room on the east near the kitchen.

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The winter was not, as Jason had predicted, particularly severe, though there was more snow than usual, but to him the days seemed endless. He liked the time of year when the cattle were on the open range and he could ride from one camp to another keeping track of his stock and his riders. He liked to sleep under the starlit sky and eat food cooked over a campfire. He was never happier than when riding a cow trail with his horse rocking along at a singlefoot. It was then he would sing lustily to keep himself company and luxuriate in the thought that here, on these broad plains he had found himself, he was doing what he liked, he was independent, he made his own decisions, and he guided the

destinies of the men who worked for him.

But life in a bunkhouse was tiresome. In the beginning, he had kept his men year in and year out because they were scarce, but now that riders were more plentiful he let some of them go in the fall and found work for the others. But even then there were days when the weather was so bad that all of them were confined to the bunkhouse; and, growing tired of playing poker, of telling tall stories, and of feats of strength, they became bored and quarrelsome. Jason missed Joe, who was bossing the crew at the lower reaches of the ranch in Lost Canyon, and would have brought him back to the main ranch if he had not been needed so badly where he was. And he dared not go away for even a few days for fear the men would allow the cattle to drift away in a blizzard.

Against his wishes and his better judgment, Jason's thoughts would turn to Vale and to Daddy Harl's store. In his mind's eye he could see Janie behind the counter in a bright pink dress with her heavy braids of rich brown hair wound around her head and her deep blue eyes looking out bravely at life. When determinedly he put her out of his waking thoughts completely, he dreamed of her at nights and woke cursing himself.

"My God, I can't get mixed up with any more women," he told himself desperately. "She's a decent girl, she's entitled to a husband, children, and a happy home; that's



what I hope for her. I wouldn't want my sister to hook up with a so and so like me; how can I want her to? She's teaching school on the Sweetwater, as far as I know she's happy and never thinks of me, why can't I forget her?" But the fact remained that he couldn't.

The snow began on Christmas Eve and continued through the next day. Tommy made a feeble attempt to celebrate the Day with roast chicken from his flock, dried apple pie, hominy, cranberries and the other foods that the men referred to as "the usual."

At the table the talk turned to home, and Jason listened as the others told of the ways in which their families had celebrated Christmas when they were children and of the letters they hoped to receive and of the presents they were sure they would get. Most of these men were young; some of them had come west to work on the railroad and others to soldier at the Fort. Most of them expected to return home and they kept in touch with their relatives.

Jason ate in silence and listened dourly to their talk. He wondered if their homes had actually been as attractive as they remembered them or whether distance had lent enchantment.

"That hell hole I was born into," he thought wryly. "I wonder if my old man is still drinking his head off there in the free state of Pennsylvania where we were all his

slaves. Well, I don't want to know bad enough to find out. Peace be with him, wherever he is."

Next day the stage was due and Shorty went up to the store and returned with the mail. He brought Jason's share, consisting mostly of week-old newspapers, into his room and said, "Mrs. Naylor died yesterday. The old man's all broke up about it and so's Janie. She et a lot of kraut after she'd took calomel and it salivated her. The funeral's tomorrow."

Jason could imagine the strait-laced old lady in her coffin in the hall where the dances had been held. He thought of Janie and decided that in all decency he should attend the funeral, though he had never made any attempt to get along with any of the people in the vicinity. Most of the other ranchers were the second crop of settlers whom he knew only slightly and the homesteaders he despised and ignored.

The funeral was in the hall and was in charge of Elder Brown, the leader of a group of Southern white trash who had lately settled north and east of Vale. It was these very homesteaders whom Jason despised most for their theiving ways. Many of them were related to the old Elder, either through descent or by marriage and all of them were regrettable, though the Elder himself gave the appearance of honesty. His long white hair and beard framed a coarse, dark, face

with flattened nose and maroon eyes.

The funeral service lasted two hours and Jason thought he could not sit through it. The Elder read Scripture and expounded it, he dwelt on the virtues of the deceased and the sorrow of those she left behind; his sermon was intended to draw tears from his audience and it very well accomplished its purpose. Daddy Harl was heart broken and Janie's smothered sobs could frequently be heard. Jason wished heartily that he had stayed at home, but it would hardly have been possible when Daddy had sent word asking him to be a pall bearer.

When the small crowd was leaving the desolate cemetery situated on the hill across the river east of the town, Jason was approached by old Doc. Hale. The old Doc. had been an army surgeon and was the first rancher to settle on Salt Creek, a small stream half way between Jason's holdings and the railroad. The two men had been friends for years and though Doc. didn't approve of everything Jason did, he was a good neighbor and had watched Jason's ranch during the trips to Texas.

"How's everything going with you, Jason?" old Doc. wanted to know.

"Well, I'll be glad when this damned winter is over. I'm tired of settling quarrels and patching up friendships. I'd fire the whole dam' crew if I could get along without



them. I've run out of anything to read and anything to do. It gets dark at half past four and it isn't bedtime till ten. There's over five hours with nothing to do, it's making bums of the men."

"Well, if you was married, Jason, and had some kids to take care of you'd go to bed earlier for one thing and the evenings would go a lot faster, too. You'd be settling your own quarrels and you wouldn't live in a bunkhouse with the hands. Take my advice and find you a wife; you'll never be sorry."

"Hell no, I'll never be sorry," Jason thought as he rode back to town. "I'll never be married either the way it looks."

He stopped at the store for the mail and a few groceries since he was so close and was sure that Janie would not be in.

"Well, Jason, this has been a heavy blow to me," Daddy told him sadly. "Mrs. Naylor was a good woman and it's a big loss. She was strong minded all right but a good, hard worker. I tried to keep her from eatin' that sour kraut after she'd had calomel but she wouldn't listen. Yessir, she was strong minded but she was a good cook and she wasn't afraid of work. Janie's a lot like her in some ways, only not stubborn. I reckon she'll be going back East as soon as her school's out. She'd just as well. I'll

probably be getting married again in a year or two. You know, this is three times I've been married. Next time will be four. There's a lot of excitement in gettin' a wife from a matrimonial bureau; you never know what to expect. I've got two that way and I'll soon be sendin' for another one, I suppose. I thought Janie would get married while she was out here and she may yet before Spring. She's been going with Glenn Spencer since she's been over that way teaching. I don't know what his intentions are, but I think he wants to marry her. Anyway I hope so. The Spencer's have got a lot of property and Glenn's their only child. Of course, his folks are set against it. They don't think Janie's good enough for Glenn 'cause she hasn't got any money; but I don't know where they'll find a better girl."

Jason always thought that Janie must have been listening to the old man's conversation because now she came to the door and told him supper was ready and that she would watch the store while he ate.

Jason knew he should have gone on, but couldn't bring himself to do so. He tried stumbly to tell her how sorry he was at her grandmother's death and was embarrassed at his halting effort.

Janie was, naturally enough, distraught. She answered Jason's remarks in monosyllables and offered no new conversation of her own, so Jason soon stepped out into the snow

of the street, mounted his horse and rode home, but not to peace.

He was no longer haunted by dreams--they were nightmares. Nightmares of Janie standing before an improvised altar with the pimply faced Glenn Spencer, his redoubtable mother and hard fisted old father glaring at her from the front row of seats in Daddy's hall.

He was hard put to know what to make of these nocturnal fantasies but they gave him no peace and no sleep, and soon his days were a torture, too.

"If I could only get away from this damned place," he fumed. "If I could only leave it," and for the first time he hated the Circle C.

"What's the matter with me?" he gloomed. "There have been women before; I could love them and leave them. Leave them easier than I could love them, in fact. I've a notion to take to Tommy's bottle. But I can't do that. I'd be sure to talk too much."

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In March the blooms of the wild black currants were a shower of gold along the river and the plums and choke-cherries among the faint green of the new leaves gleamed as white as the drifts of snow that had just melted. When Jason drove along the river on his way to Fort Hays he



thought that the plains had never been so beautiful or had held so much promise. His cattle and horses had all come through the winter in good shape and his cows were even now dropping fat, black calves in the tall grass of the draws. It was just such a day as a man could spend and enjoy on a light wagon following a trail into town. He was learning to keep his mind on the cattle business again and thought he was doing fine.

In Fort Hays the stores were busy selling Spring supplies to the ranchers and Jason met a great many men he knew. He had business at the courthouse and that took enough time that he could lull his conscience into letting him think that it would be too late to return to the ranch the same day. Besides, he wanted to spend some time in one or another of the dives along North Main Street. A man got pretty logy shut up all winter away from town. It would be good to shoot some pool, to dance, to drink a little whiskey, and perhaps to spend the night upstairs or in the back room with one of the dance hall girls.

Jason ate his dinner at noon in the hotel on Peach Tree Corner and arranged for a room for the night. He had put his horses in a livery stable across from the courthouse and felt that he was fixed until morning. He went over town purchasing the supplies he needed, visiting with acquaintances in the various places of business, and went to the bank to

see how his account stood. Jason didn't believe much in banks, but he couldn't carry money in a belt forever, so he had to trust this one to a certain extent. However, most of his money went back into land and cattle after taxes and expenses were paid. The Kansas Pacific Railroad had been given an empire by an over-indulgent government and was glad to part with this land for ready cash.

When Jason returned to the hotel at supper time he found Mrs. Keene, the landlady, in a flutter.

"Oh Mr. Jarrett," she babbled, "a young lady has just come in from Vale. She's here to buy her wedding outfit. Came in with some neighbors who're staying the night with friends, but don't have room for this young school teacher, and I don't have room either unless you'll let her have your room and go in a double room with some of the other boys."

"Who is it?" Jason wanted to know.

"A Miss Ferris, a school teacher. Awfully pretty and so nice. I wish she'd get married here in Fort Hays. I'd just love to see her. She'll make such a beautiful bride."

"She can have the room. I wouldn't be in it much anyway tonight," Jason told the old lady and went upstairs to move his razor and clean shirt into the room she had specified.

That he wouldn't sleep was a foregone conclusion, but that he would go from one dance hall to another, from a pool

hall to a saloon, and back again was something else. He couldn't swallow enough of the rot gut whiskey to get drunk and, when all the joints were closed, he walked the streets till morning.

"I could kick myself to hell and gone," he told the sharp north wind that blew in toward daybreak. "Here it looks like a blizzard's coming and I'll have to hole up in this town till it's over. I should have headed for home when the joints all closed. No telling how long this will last or how my cattle will fare in it with me away." But he knew in all reason that a March blizzard could last only a few days at most.

When he went in to breakfast Janie was, of course, at the table.

"Good Morning, Miss Janie," he answered her greeting and was surprised that he felt no pain at sight of her. Perhaps it was because of the plan he had evolved during the long hours of the night and which he was now daring himself to put into action.

"Do you think this storm will amount to anything, Mr. Jarrett?" Janie wanted to know and waited for Jason's answer as though she were consulting an oracle.

"I think it will be a real blizzard; probably last a week and block all the trails," Jason answered and thought he saw relief flood her face.



The storm gave out with all it had and did indeed block the trails, the railroad and all the streets in town.

Janie had small inclination for buying her wedding outfit anyway and now that the storm offered an excuse she procrastinated. Who would want to walk along the uncleared boardwalks and paving stones that served for sidewalks and have to step out of the path into the snow every time another person came along? Not Janie, certainly. She preferred to stay in Mrs. Keene's small, private sitting room before a glowing heater and wait for Jason to come in every hour or so with the weather report.

"Snowing like blazes outside," he would say as though she couldn't see through the window. "Probably keep it up for two or three days longer."

"Who would have thought," babbled Mrs. Keene coming in with more coal, "that you were the man Miss Ferris was buying her wedding outfit for? No wonder you let her have your room so quick when I mentioned her name." Mrs. Keene had put two and two together and come up with the wrong answer. "Why don't you folks get married while you're here?" she went on. "I've just been thinking, neither one of you has any family out west, Miss Ferris' school is out and Mr. Jarrett, you can't get home for days. You could be married right in this room. Miss Ferris, some of your dresses that are already made would be plenty good enough. That blue

brilliantine is mighty precious. It isn't clothes; it's love that makes a marriage.

"I'll just leave you here alone now and you can make up your minds, but take my advice and get married now."

Mrs. Keene waddled on out of the room unaware of the situation she was leaving behind her.

Janie's embarrassment was pitiful to behold as she rose from her chair and started to the door that led above stairs to her room. But Jason stepped before her and laid a detaining hand on her arm.

"Why don't we, Janie?" he asked. "Why don't we take Mrs. Keene's advice?"

"This is insufferable," gasped Janie and tried to make the door again, but Jason's fingers bit into her arm.

"No, it isn't," Jason insisted. "It's just what I want. Come on, Janie, let's get married now as she has asked us to."

"Jason Jarrett, you've never so much as asked me to go to a dance, or for a buggy ride with you, and here you have the effrontery to think I'll marry you when I'm engaged to someone else and my wedding day is set."

"Janie, you won't be happy with Glenn Spencer. It looks like his family's well off, but I happen to know the sheriff is just behind old Spencer. You'll have to live in along with those old folks and they don't like you. They

want Glenn to marry someone like Edith Kellogg with enough money to pull them out of the hole they're in. You won't be doing Glenn any favor to marry him when you don't love him and when the Spencers stand to lose everything they've got within a year, if you do."

"Why don't I love Glenn Spencer and why can't we get along as well as other young couples around here? Why can't we take a homestead and work hard and make a good living?"

"You can't make a living on a homestead because Glenn is a spendthrift. He has never done anything but run around behind a team of fast horses after fast women, and liquor, and cards. He doesn't know how to work and never will, because he'll never want to. Now as to why you don't love him, it's because you love me."

"Who says I do? You're getting around a little late, Jason Jarrett. What have you been waiting on?"

"I may be a little late, but I love you, Janie, and you love me and I'm asking you to marry me. Will you?"

"I want to know what you've been waiting on. Why did you show me so much attention at the store? Why did you hang around, but never ask me to go anywhere with you?"

"There were reasons, Janie. Reasons I'd rather not talk about to a sweet girl like you. I've been around a while, you know; there have been women. I thought I ought to tell you, but I couldn't bring myself to."



"Well, I suppose there aren't any men who haven't had a past of some kind from what Grandmother said. And so that's yours. Grandmother thought there must be something, but we supposed it was worse than that."

"Well, thanks," Jason replied dryly. "Shall I get the license now and we can be married this afternoon?"

"No. Not this afternoon. I want to think about it. I feel like I'm being rushed." Her pretty face showed a stubborn anger and Jason was pleased and amused. He wouldn't have wanted her to jump at him right off. And he could see that she was weakening.

"All right then, Baby, think about it. But right now let me kiss you. You know you never have; and consider yourself engaged. I'm going out to buy a ring. Two rings."

Janie was still angry, but she did not move away when Jason approached. His kiss was tender, respectful, thrilling. He released her just when she had begun to think how nice it would be to spend the rest of her life in his arms.

"I'll be back, Sweetheart," he promised; and he was, at the end of a long afternoon Janie had spent boring a hole with her eyes through the window pane.

He came in to the little parlor just before supper and tossed two ring boxes in Janie's lap.

"You should have gone along with me," he said. "But

if you don't like these rings, we can exchange them."

The first box she opened without comment. It contained a heavy gold wedding band and she put it back in its box after a brief look. The second ring was made up of an oblong ruby with three small pearls on each side and one at either end. The gems were genuine and the ring had cost a great deal of money. The ruby gleamed in the lamplight and the pearls gave off a soft glow.

"That's you, Sweetheart, all fire and sparkle one minute but soft and sweet as cream the next," Jason told her. "Do you like them and have you made up your mind?"

"I made up my mind about you the first time I ever saw you, Jason," Janie answered honestly. "And the rings are beautiful, but the wedding ring seems awful heavy."

"I liked it, Janie. I don't want our marriage to be a light affair, but I can exchange the ring."

"No, if you like it, I do too. It's just that I haven't got used to it yet."

"Well, you keep them till morning and then we'll put them both on for good. And how about a kiss now? It may be the last chance we'll have this evening. The snow has stopped and everybody is supposed to get out and shovel paths by moonlight."

The rings were comforting to Janie as they adjusted themselves to her finger as she put them on when she went to

bed that night.

"I'll be Mrs. Jason Jarrett in the morning," she thought. "I love Jason with all my heart but I'm not completely happy. There's something about it that doesn't seem right and I don't know why. I can't tell whether it's because I haven't treated Glenn right or because Jason doesn't act like he's altogether happy. There's something about the way he kisses me. I wish Grandmother or Mother was alive. I wonder if all girls feel like this the night before they're married."

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Jason was a tender, loving husband and generous to a fault. He felt that the marriage was a shabby affair, performed as it was in a hotel parlor by a justice of the peace and he tried to make up to Janie what she had missed in both courtship and marriage.

"Buy whatever you want and need, Sweetheart," he told her. "I don't have a damned thing to start housekeeping with; not even a kettle that isn't black and battered or a dish that's not cracked. We'll need blankets, sheets, towels, everything. Get them. Clothes too, whatever you want."

The wagon was piled high on the homeward trip and Jason was moved to remark, "Well, I didn't suppose that I'd



have a load like this coming home. I don't know where we ought to live till we can get a house built. I could kick the boys out of the bunkhouse, but I don't know where they'd go; as cold as it is, it's too early to send them out to the camps. And anyway, there's Tommy. Wouldn't be any place to send him. Besides he'll have to cook for the fellows that build the house." And then Jason told her about the house and Janie thought that it was very nicely planned, except that she insisted there should be an upstairs with four bedrooms because she expected to have a large family.

Jason had bought out several homesteaders and, though the houses were mostly poor shacks that he used for cow camps, he now suggested, "How would you like to live on the Ryan place, or how about the Shepherd house? I've got the Burke place now, too. Just so it isn't too far from the main ranch. You'll want to be close to tell the builders what to do. We'll get the rock from that quarry down near the river and, if we get started right away, the house ought to be done by cold weather. I'll be glad when we get home; I can't help worrying about the cattle."

Afterward it seemed to Jason that this was the busiest and happiest summer he had ever lived through. Besides the regular work of the ranch there was the house and he wanted to be near it every possible minute. Janie insisted that she was jealous of it and would never move in.

"I've dreamed about that house for years, Sweetheart, when I was asleep and when I was awake and I waited to build it until I had somebody to put in it. There never was anybody who just fitted until I found you. And now, I can't wait for it to be finished. I'll help you make a list of the furniture we'll need, so we can get it as soon as the masons and carpenters are done. You can have anything you want, only I've got some ideas I hope you'll like."

Janie realized that his ideas were good and it was not in her nature to make anyone unhappy or to be contentious, so she went along with his plans. She, too, was happy in a quiet, joyous sort of way. Occasionally her joy welled up in a merry laugh that surprised Jason who seldom smiled and rarely laughed.

"Life's always been a pretty serious proposition to me," he told Janie.

"There were a lot of us at home. My old man kicked us out as soon as we lost our pin feathers, if we didn't do exactly as he said, and I'm not one for taking orders. There wasn't any reason on God's earth for him to be like he was; always telling us what to do and then setting the example he did, the lazy, drunken old so and so."

"Jason! You shouldn't speak so of your father," Janie scolded gently.

"A father doesn't deserve any respect unless he acts

respectable, my dear; and my father didn't."

"Is he still alive?"

"I don't know. My mother died when I was fifteen and I left a month or so later. I was big for my age and I could get a job on a farm and have a lot better treatment than I ever had at home. I was the youngest and the old man wanted me to stay there and do all the farm work and never leave the place. I said to hell with that. So I left one night and headed west. Didn't stop till I was about forty miles from home. Anyone would give a fellow a meal and a bed for a little work those days and I kept traveling till I figured I was far enough away that Pa wouldn't find out where I was. And even then I didn't stay at one place for long. I never wanted to go back or even to hear from any of them, so I didn't write to anyone. I thought the old man could come after me any time before I was twenty-one, so I just kept moving farther away. I saved my wages, too, such as they were. That's where I got the habit of turning my cash into gold and wearing it around my middle, day and night."

"And then what?"

"Well, pretty soon the Civil War came along; and being young, I had to be one of the first to volunteer. I was with the army of the Potomac, School Ma'am. I guess I don't have to tell you where all I was and what I did. I went in



as an infantryman, of course; but as the men from the batteries were killed off, they filled up the batteries with us fellows and that's how I got into the artillery."

"What did you do when you got out?"

"I headed west again. Always farther west. After the war there wasn't any particular place I wanted to go to. I did think of going back home, then decided against it."

"And where was home?"

"It was in the southeast part of Pennsylvania."

"Near what town?"

"If you have any idea of finding my long lost relatives, you can forget it, Sweetheart. The ones I cared most for are gone--my Mother and my sister Mary. They were the ones I loved and they died before I left home; Mary of typhoid and Mother of overwork and mean treatment. You remind me of Mary. The same sweet ways and bright mind. She was older than I was and practically raised me."

"We'll name our first daughter Mary," Janie mused.

"And then what did you do?"

"I wasn't satisfied to work on a farm any more, though I did a lot of it, so I went back into the army for a stretch and then I came out to Fort Hays and scouted for a while."

"And that's everything?"

"Well, anyway it's enough."

"But where did you get the money to own a ranch like this?" Janie wanted to know.

"I told you I always saved my money and I started out pretty small here, just pretty small."

"Well, that's the way everybody starts--pretty small," Janie grinned at him knowingly. "But you're boring with a good sized auger now, Mister."

"Mrs. Jarrett, for a lady you use some pretty smutty language. And to look at you, who'd ever think it." Jason marveled.

"Oh I'm so happy," Janie sighed blissfully as she melted into his embrace. "I have everything in this world I want. Everything. And you're the best of all. Life is just one long happy day after another. I wouldn't trade places with anybody, not anybody in the world."

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The house was done before cold weather set in and Jason said, "Now, Baby, we'll go to Kansas City with cattle and bring back furniture and carpets, curtains, everything we need. There's nothing good enough in Fort Hays for this house. It's the biggest and best ranch house in the whole damn country and before we put the carpets all down we'll have a big party and show it off. Maybe we'd better make it two or three parties. I want to have a dance in the sitting

room; it's big enough we can run two sets in there. How about it?"

"I don't care so much for parties. I'm happy when just the two of us are together, Jason. It will be a lot of work and trouble."

"You won't have to do any of the work or clean up any of the dirt, Baby. We'll get Mrs. Sprague and Mrs. Lane in to do all that. These damned homesteader's wives can always use a little extra money."

"So I've heard," Janie observed maliciously, thinking of what Daddy Harl had always said about Jason "liking them better married."

Jason sensed the tone of her remark and inquired, "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Why nothing, nothing at all. We'll give the party and Mrs. Lane and Mrs. Sprague can help. They're both nice ladies; I like them." And she meant it.

No party given in the plains region had ever been as pretentious as the one Jason threw when the house was completed. No house in the country had ever been so sumptuously built and furnished. It contained the best that Kansas City had to offer.

"For what's the use in having a house, if you can't have the best one around; and I never expect to build another," Jason explained.



The silver hanging lamps were polished to a soft luster and their prisms threw off a thousand lights, the long French windows stood open to admit the fresh fall air and as the guests entered the double doors of the front entrance they were met by a smiling Jason and Janie who directed them up the curving stairway to the rooms above where they might remove their wraps.

Everyone who was anyone came to the party and that meant that all the big ranchers and their wives and their sons and daughters were there. The ladies' wide silken skirts rustled on the floor as they danced and the fine leather in the men' boots made soft creaking noises. The music was furnished by a band from Fort Hays and had played for the military balls there.

The men had drunk just enough liquor to feel at their affable best and the ladies' faces, too, were wreathed in smiles. Most of the older ladies did not dance, but sat in chairs around the room and diligently noted who went through the French windows onto the wide porches and how long it was before they came back.

At midnight an elaborate supper was served in the large dining room and then the dance went on till morning. No one cared to drive the long miles home in the dark and the Jarrets could never have kept them all overnight. Breakfast was served at daybreak and the guests proceeded to

their homes. When the party was over Janie and Jason sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and discussed the event.

"Well, Sweetheart, what did you think of the crowd? All the best people; everybody we asked came. Even the Spencers. I'm glad Glenn's married; he and Edith make a good looking couple even though she is a head taller. And her old man's money saved the Spencers' necks just like I told you it would. I didn't think the Pattons would come. They hold their snoots higher than anybody around here. That damned old hypocrite runs after women, takes a drink on the sly, steals a steer now and then when he thinks he won't be caught, and then poses as a Christian. I don't go to church but they tell me old Patton's the leader, sits on the front row and Amens everything the preacher says when he's giving them hell. I may be a rogue, but damned if I'm a hypocrite.

"If going to church would make you one, you're not," Janie was moved to answer.

"You like to get a dig in once in a while on the old man, don't you?" Jason questioned good humoredly.

"Just once in a while," was the answer. "I thought Glenn Spencer was exceedingly handsome. He has the kindest blue eyes. I love to dance with him"

"I noticed you did. I think his pimples are getting better, too. He's about your height, you should be able to

dance with him well."

"I liked dancing with Mr. Pool, too. He's so smooth."

Patton "Well, John's a little heavy behind, I'd say, but he cuts a big figure on a dance floor. By damn! Are you trying to make me jealous?"

people Janie realized that this was as near as she and Jason had ever come to quarreling and she also knew that he had a low boiling point; but she was tired and just a little angry because it had seemed to her that he had danced more than was necessary with the younger, unmarried women who had been present. So she jibed a little further.

"Everybody thinks that Nettie Gray is fast, but you don't seem to have any objection to that, do you? Or to any other fast women from what I've heard."

room Jason flushed darkly and got to his feet. By hell, he thought, I won't quarrel with her; I'll go outside and work. I can eat dinner with the men. Damn the party anyway, if this is all the good it was.

He started for the door, but Janie said softly, "Jason, I'm sorry. It's all my fault. You're so seldom in the house I shouldn't quarrel with you."

What if "You're a sweet woman, Janie. But don't ride me too hard. I don't want to row with you."

sighed "All right, Darling, we won't quarrel then. Mrs. Patton remarked about how suddenly we got married and



glanced at my waistline."

Jason roared, "She would, the old muley cow. Old Patton gives her lots to think about anyhow. What else did she have to say?"

"Well, she thinks the house is mighty big for two people to live in and one hired girl to take care of and she wonders why we don't have the hands in to eat and sleep. I didn't really know why."

"Well, I do. I lived long enough in the grime and smoke of a bunkhouse. I'll not smell anybody's dirty feet again, unless it's yours."

"What a remark to make to a lady. How were you brought up, Mr. Jarrett? Mrs. Stewart liked the stairs, but thought that, curving like they do, they took up too much room and wondered why you didn't build the house of brick instead of stone. She said, too, that fireplaces are not stylish these days and why didn't you have a big wall cupboard between the dining room and the kitchen instead? Oh yes, and Mrs. White thinks the French windows will let in a lot of cold air in winter."

"They're all green eyed with jealousy aren't they? What did they think of your dress?"

"They thought it must have cost a lot of money and hoped you could afford it. I hoped so, too. But the men were very complimentary. John Pool said I looked divine in

blue and Glenn Spencer----

"I don't want to hear what Glenn Spencer said. I thought he was unusually friendly, though, and he damned well ought to be. He ought to thank me for beating his time. Do you want me to take you to the top of the stairs and drop you over the rail? No? Well, then stop digging at me. Let's have some of that cake and some more coffee. I was so damn busy playing the host last night I didn't get a chance to eat."

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In after years it seemed to Janie that she would have given anything to have been able to go back to those first months of her marriage, back to the sunny Fall days when she rode the trails with Jason from one cow camp to another. Sometimes they went in the buckboard carrying supplies and at other times they rode horseback rocking along at a singlefoot, spurs jingling, horses hoofs clipping, and good saddle leather creaking.

At these times Jason was a most agreeable companion. He had spent almost the entire war years in the army, besides the time spent fighting Indians, and as a scout, and his reminiscences were spicy and entertaining, although occasionally slightly colored. They laughed a great deal on these occasions as they rode along the trails or when they

stopped to eat a cold lunch beneath some lonely cottonwood or hackberry out on the range away from the stream.

"Oh Jason, I love you so," Janie would tell him. "Do be careful when you're working cattle. I couldn't ever bear to give you up. If your horse should step in a prairie dog hole and throw you, it could break your neck. You will be careful, won't you?"

"Well, I'm not any more anxious to die than the next fellow, for sure; and I will be careful because I have no wish to leave a rich young widow unprotected out here on the range. Not that you'd be a widow for very long, I expect."

"I couldn't stand it. I simply couldn't stand to give you up."

"Well, I plan to live a hundred years or more. I'm pretty healthy, tough as whang leather. And I'm getting too much out of life to leave it. Let's go to the dance tomorrow night at the Stewart's. If we don't take to going places more they won't ask us."

The dances and parties were a source of mild annoyance to Janie. Though she was sure of Jason's love, it made her jealous to see him dance with any young, good looking female and afterwards she would try to make him jealous in retaliation. But she enjoyed visits to the neighboring ranches whether on business or pleasure and most of all she liked to visit at the Hale Ranch with the old doctor and his wife.



Doctor Hale was a character. Though a well educated man, he often used slovenly speech and wore shabby clothes; his riding horse was nothing to speak of and Mrs. Hale said that his saddle was a disgrace.

"That awful old saddle," she would wail. "Why won't you get another? Covered with a dirty pig skin and the bristles turned out. There you carry medical supplies in saddle bags like that. You ought to be ashamed and it ought to be against the law."

But the doctor merely pulled at his short gray beard and declared that the saddle suited him to a T.

"Never let a woman start to make you over, Jason," he would confide. "If she ever gets a toe hold you're a goner; and when she got through with you, you wouldn't suit her any better. I'd get another saddle just to stop her yapping, but she'd only go on to something else. So I have to keep the saddle though I'm tired of setting on those bristles myself. The way it was, when we came out here, I didn't have money enough to buy a new one, so I got an old tree from a fellow, tanned this hog skin and covered the tree. Oh well, it gives the woman something to complain about and she can keep herself busy thinking of something new to say when I'm gone."

The doctor was away from home a great deal. In actuality he did not want to doctor people at all. He was a

rancher and that was what he wanted to do, but he could not refuse help when some man, woman, or child came racing over the prairies and asked him to come.

At these times the doctor would ask for "numbers" and tell the distracted rider to return home. The numbers were for section, township, and range and given these he could find his way on the darkest night. In the case of some poor homesteader, he would probably receive nothing for his services, but it was not in his nature to refuse anyone in distress and, though he carried pills loose in his pocket and dispensed them by hand, no one had ever been known to refuse his medicine.

One day in a reminiscent mood he told Janie, "When I first came out here half these damned people had scurvy and they all had fleas and ticks. You know how fleas hang around the dirt in a sod house or a dugout and how you can't get them off of you and, if you do, they hop right back. I always want to take little children away from people that live in holes like that. I've seen them crawling around on a dirt floor among the dogs with the fleas and flies so thick on them you'd wonder how they lived. About half of them did die, too, from summer complaint and spotted fever and this and that. Not much you can do to save 'em when they have to live that way.

"And women! My God, Janie, you wouldn't believe what

women have been expected to go through in this country. There was Mrs. Drew over on Coon Creek. She had been in hard labor for two days when old Drew finally let one of the young ones come after me. Then when I got there he said, "Save the child.

"I said, 'To hell with you; I probably can't save either.' But the child did live, though the mother couldn't and I tried everything. It's that idiot of his that can't put her shoes on the right feet.

"Tell her about the time you went over on the Wet Walnut after those horse thieves," Jason urged the doctor in the hope of changing the subject.

"That was in '75," the doctor mused soberly. "Things were still as rough as a cob out here and these horse thieves had run off most of my horses and cattle, so I gathered up some other ranchers and with their riders and mine we went after them.

"Well, we got our live stock all right, if we did have to ride more than a hundred miles and leave some decorations hanging to a tree along the creek bank. But on the way back, we met this fellow riding hell for leather toward the Fort for a doctor. One of the other boys said, "Well, this man is a doctor, won't he do?" Fellow took one gander at me and said, "A hell of a lookin' doctor he is, but my wife's a dyin'. Come on.



"I didn't want to be separated from the rest of the boys, so some of them came with me and we hurried after the man. And about his remark. Remember we'd been on the trail nearly a week and a fellow gets dirty."

"And you had that gosh awful pig skin saddle and you're not much to look at anyway." interposed Mrs. Hale.

"Yes I did, and I'm not," the doctor resumed. "Well, we got to his dugout pretty soon and the place was swarming with young ones and all of them dirty. The woman was in convulsions evidently caused by poison. I asked the fellow, his name was Sloan, what she'd been eating, but he was mighty vague about it all and I thought he had the guiltiest look of any man I ever saw, but I was pretty busy with his wife.

"I never worked harder over anybody in my life than I did over her and it was nearly morning of the next day before I was sure she would live. But, my God, you have to save a woman like that when there's a houseful of children.

"Mrs. Sloan must have been a handsome woman before she was worn out with hard work and child bearing. She was still beautiful in a madonna sort of way, but she wasn't a bit enthusiastic because I had saved her life and that worried me.

"As a doctor I thought it was no more than right that I should know what she had taken and why, so I questioned her rather thoroughly and she got mad and told me a mouthful.

"It seemed like her two older sisters back in Indiana where they lived had gone wrong and her old man had them and their brats at home on his hands, so when Mrs. Sloan was fifteen she was married, against her will, to Sloan who was a surly cuss and would have been half-witted if he'd had another ounce of brains.

"To say that Mrs. Sloan was miserable from the first would be putting it mildly. She hated Sloan and wanted to leave him, but there was no place to go. When she got out here she was homesick and, child like, wanted her Mother, but Sloan wouldn't even let her write home.

"He pretty well saw to it that there was a young one every year the first few years, but when she got despondent and wouldn't take any interest in the children or the house work even a half-wit like him got worried and tried to put on the brakes; but they still had an increase on the average of one every two years and she got to the place where she just sat and looked out the window.

"Finally he hunted up a quack doctor that sold him some capsules guaranteed to cause an abortion and that's what she had taken, and that's why she was damned near dead when I happened along.

"All of this just goes to prove what I've always said, Jason. Marriage is a matter of economics. Men have an urge and women are a convenience. In fact, marriage

itself is a convenience but originally it wasn't worked out for that purpose; it was to protect those old devils with a batch of productive daughters who'd have been ruined if they'd had to provide for the offspring. So every man is saddled with a wife and has to take care of his own get. And you can surround marriage with all the sanctity and ceremony that you want to, that's still what it is--a matter of economics or else why are old maids and illegitimate children looked down on? And that's why women are swaddled with all these restrictions. They can't do this and they can't do that, for if they do they'll be gossiped about and no man will want to marry them and then Pa will have them at home to feed all their lives. Or if there's more than just talk, Pa will have not only his old maid daughter at home but her unlawful and unprovided-for brats to take care of.

"But that's the way it is and as far as I can see that's the way it has to be, for if women were turned loose--Ye Gods, the earth couldn't provide enough food for the population. But don't believe that tripe about matrimony being a sacred institution. It's just like I say, an economic necessity, a safeguard. Why, if everybody could see a marriage for what it actually is, they'd be ashamed to attend a ceremony. That's why it's invested with all those trappings: to make it seem what it isn't. Well the missus



says supper's ready. Come on in."

On the way home Janie was unusually silent and Jason finally asked, "What is it, Sweetheart? You haven't said a word since we started out."

"I was thinking of what the doctor said. He surely doesn't believe all that, do you think?"

"He probably does. He's pretty hard headed and darned cantankerous sometimes. But don't you pay any attention to what he says. I sorta doubt whether he and his missus are married anyway."

"What--?" Janie gasped. "What do you mean and how do you know?"

"I think he was married to her older sister and then he and his missus got stuck on each other and struck out for the west together."

"But how do you know? Did he tell you?"

"Oh, no. But once when the Doc's horse fell on him and broke his leg in two places I went over to help out and I slept in a room next to his. Well, one night when the pain was pretty bad, he got to snarling at her and that's what came out. I don't think either one of them realizes I know because I was sound asleep, of course, a little later when she came to rouse me. I wouldn't tell anyone. I never have and never will. Women like Mrs. Tom Patton would put her on a rail and ride her out of the country."

"I don't know but what they should."

"No. Mrs Hale is a good woman. She may have made a mistake, but basically she's good. And don't think she hasn't paid for her mistake by living with that old bat. I like him, but I wouldn't want to live with him steady. And how does she know he won't get up and leave her at any time? I don't know but what he could put her out without a cent. Anyway it's something for her to think about."

"I noticed she went in the kitchen to start supper when he began to expound his ideas about marriage. But then she's doubtless heard them before."

"She gets to hear a lot. And, of course, that's what's the matter with the doc: he sees human nature at its worst. Some of the things he can tell would curl your hair. Especially about the war. I'll get him started on it some time, if I can."

"I don't care to hear much about the goriness of war, though I think the stories about what the men did when they were together are interesting. Daddy used to talk about it lots. If it hadn't been for the war, he would be alive today. But the poor food they had and the exposure ruined his health."

"It didn't help any of us much, I reckon," Jason responded. "But let's think about us. Did you ever see the sky this pretty? I used to lay and look at the stars when

we slept outdoors in Virginia. I never knew the names of many of them, but I used to watch the same ones every night."

Janie made some indistinct reply and they rode on along the trail at a singlefoot through the noises of the night and the sounds that good steel and leather make on the backs of a pair of well-trained saddle horses.

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Time sped on pleasantly at the Circle C. Mrs. Sprague's husband had died and she was glad to keep the big house clean and cook for Jason and Janie. Jason liked for Janie to be always ready to go with him either on horseback or in the buckboard; he wanted her hands to be smooth and white, her hair nicely arranged and her person well dressed. In order to pass the time in the house she sewed and attended to keeping herself clean and well kept. She loved the scent of sandalwood and always used it, and Jason said that the whole house smelled of her perfume.

The wives of the other ranchers, many of whom had as little to do as she, came often to visit her and much time was spent reveling in gossip, in talk of fashions and of trips they had taken to Kansas City and on visits back East. Jason was an affable host and would occasionally join in these conversations and was willing and anxious that Janie should return the visits. His love for her was deep and



unselfish and he wished only for her happiness.

The Circle C was a pleasant place at any time of year but in summer this was especially true. The great stone house was cool under the cottonwoods and elms, the French windows stood open to the breeze, the porches were inviting, and the well tended lawn swept down past the spring to the river.

Many of the other women were not happy in their environment and wished that they might go back to their homes in the East where their parents and brothers and sisters lived. But Janie was never heard to complain.

"Why I love it here," she would tell them. "Of course, I haven't any one to go back to, but some cousins who are a lot younger than I, but I think I would like it here anyway. Where would you ever find lovelier spring flowers than those we have in the draws and along the river, or where else are there miles and miles of grassland waving in the wind?"

"Yes, in the wind," retorted Mrs. Fitzpatrick sharply. "The wind is right, it blows all the time. In the winter it's a cold wind and in the summer it's a hot wind but it always blows. Sometimes, when I am alone in the house, I think I can't stand the way it howls. Mr. Fitzpatrick says it blows against a splinter that acts in the same way as a string on an instrument and that it's not a bad sound at all,

but to me it is the last straw. I get to thinking of what is said about some of these haunted houses where the cowboys come back to play their ghostly tunes of nights. In some of them they say a door won't stay locked or even shut."

"Oh those stories, " laughed Janie. "The houses around here aren't old enough to be haunted."

"What about that old stone one down the river from here? Where that woman was killed by Indians? You don't believe it's haunted?"

"I've never heard much about it. Jason owns the place now. One of his men took it for a homestead after those people left. Later, Jason bought it and sometimes the men stay there when they're down that way. There's a story to the effect that a man was killed there in a brawl or that outlaws raided the place or something. I've never asked Jason much about it really."

"There's probably nothing to the stories, but I still think of them when the wind howls around the house, if I'm alone," said Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

Janie laughed again and dismissed the stories from her mind. She was far too happy to worry about spooks and haunts. She lived in a new stone house with a curving walnut stair-way, there were thick, soft carpets on the floors and her friends entered through a graceful arched doorway surmounted by a fanlight. She had a loving, indulgent husband who took her with him every place he could, who

bought her anything she expressed a wish for and who shielded her from the world and all that was unpleasant in it. She moved in the best circles and was welcomed anywhere she went. Her clothes were bought in Kansas City or ordered especially for her from Chicago. She used expensive perfume every day and never worked at anything unless she wanted to. She knew that she was provided for for the rest of her life and her security gave her grace, poise, and confidence.

It was during the fifth year of her marriage, when Janie had almost given up the hope of having a child, that she realized she was pregnant. Jubilantly happy, she related the news to Jason and was surprised at his reaction.

"But Darling, I supposed you were longing for children. I thought I had disappointed you," she told him.

"I thought we were getting along all right as we were," Jason told her. "Now you can't ride with me or go places over these rough trails to town even in the buggy. The house will get to seem like a prison for you."

"I'll not mind. I can take walks down to the spring and along the river. You know I love the river. I'll wade and swim all summer."

"But you'll not be with me like you always were before. I'll miss coming into the house for you to go along on rides."

"Jason, we can't always be children ourselves. We



have to grow up. I thought you'd be glad." Janie was almost in tears.

Jason took her into his arms and soothed her tenderly. "I am glad," he said without much conviction. "The time will soon be over. I'll stay around the house as much as I can. Joe will have to take more responsibility. You know, he doesn't drink and hell around as much as he used to. I haven't made up my mind whether it's a woman or old age that's crept up on him. I reckon either one will work a change for the better."

Jason did spend more time around the home place and the time did seem to go swiftly during Janie's pregnancy. She often thought that he was even kinder and more thoughtful of her welfare than he had been when they were first married and she was exceedingly happy.

"Oh, I can hardly wait. I want to know so bad whether it will be a boy or a girl. I don't know myself what I want, but I can't wait to find out," she would tell him.

Jason was not altogether happy and not over-anxious for the waiting period to end. He had spent a great deal of time around livestock and knew that even dumb animals do not come through labor unscathed. He worried Doc Hale nearly out of his mind by having him come over at least every two weeks to see Janie.

"I can't get it out of my mind that I'll lose her,"

he told the old man repeatedly.

The old Doc smoothed his rumpled hair and pulled his beard reflectively on one of these occasions. "I can't see any reason why she wouldn't live through it, Jason," he said soberly. "She's young and as strong as a horse. The only thing I can't see through is why she's so all fired big. You haven't got any elephant blood in the family, have you? Any tendency to twins? That must be it, twins. Now twin boys would be something. If I was you, that's what I'd wish for. And quit being so damned doleful. If she gets despondent about it all, I'll have my hands full. Just don't let your mind run on losing her. Think how lucky you are to have this increase. Think what I'd give to have some children I could claim as my own. A son that I could depend on to look after the place when I'm gone. The missus does the best she can, but the men take advantage and loaf when I'm not around. I don't know what will happen when I'm gone for good. I'm a lot older than she is, you know. Just so there's enough left to see her through is all I care. A man makes mistakes when he's young that he has to lay awake nights and pay for when he's older."

"Yes, he does," Jason answered emphatically. And the old man looked at him; wondering what he was paying for.

As Janie's time drew near, Jason hovered over her even more anxiously and the old Doc "slept with his pants

on" as he said. Mrs. Hale insisted that she, too, would come with the doctor when the occasion demanded.

"The doctor is good with the mother," she said. "In fact, there's none better, but after that job's done he relaxes and doesn't see that the child is properly attended to. Now I'm coming along and see that this baby gets the right start."

"It's the mother that counts," Doc insisted. "Especially if there's a household with more children. Anyway a man doesn't want to lose his woman. He might not find another one that irritated him in just the same places."

The wicked old man grinned in appreciation of his own humor and watched the Missus' face. He didn't actually want to hurt her, but he did enjoy throwing an occasional barbed remark in her direction.

The Missus' face showed no emotion. The day was long gone when old Doc could hurt her feelings. If she could have had her life to live over, she would have done differently perhaps; but she was not a woman to spend useless hours in regret for something she could not change.

"Since your mind always turns to irregularities in marriage, why don't you tell Janie about old Bud Stone?" she asked him.

"By God, yes. Jason, do you remember old Bud? Lived over on the Paradise. Had a big flock of sheep over there,



but he lost most of them the winter of '79. They got into the creek and floundered around in the water and snow during a blizzard till their wool got wet and they piled up and smothered. A lot of people thought old Graham was responsible for seeing that they got headed down the creek. You know how steep the banks are with no chance for them to get out. Of course, Graham wouldn't want Stone's sheep on his cattle range and I don't know as I can blame him. But anyway with his sheep gone, Stone lost everything he had and I mean everything. The bank closed right down on him. He wouldn't go to work like a common man, felt himself too good for that, so he just got drunk and stayed that way practically all the time. Finally he was barefoot and winter coming on again so he traded his wife to Sam Deering for a pair of boots. Now don't look so horrified, Janie. Just remember, he couldn't have made the deal stick, even out here in this rough and ready country, if the woman hadn't been willing. So far as I know she and Sam got along fine. She was a good worker and a smart woman at business. Made Sam a good wife."

"Wife?" Janie raised her brows and her nostrils dilated slightly. "Well, yes. Bud drank himself to death pretty shortly and Sam and the woman got married after a proper period of mourning."

"People out here take lawlessness so lightly, I can't

get over it," Janie complained.

"Now, Janie, don't set yourself up like Mrs. Tom Patton. Nobody's as good as she wants them to be or as she pretends to be herself. Everybody's human. Some more so than others. Most of the people who came out here were trying to get away from something. You don't leave a place where everything suits you to a gnat's heel."

"How about Mrs. Patton? Why is she here?"

"I don't have any of the particulars on her case, but from appearances I would say that he is probably the one that decided it was time to leave the old home place. Tom is a shifty character. He has women on his mind almost continuously. He can't keep his mind nor his hands off them, unless it's when he's standing up there conducting that Sunday School of his."

"Well, there are some good looking women attend Sunday School and church," Jason observed. "Old Tom gets to shake hands with them all at the door as they leave."

"I thought you had never gone," Janie said curiously.

"I did, though, just enough times to get sickened out at the sight of that old hypocrite standing up there running the show. If his wife knew all the things he's done, she wouldn't begin to live with him--if she's as righteous as she pretends to be."

"There are stories to the effect that she doesn't

live with him, you know," the doctor put in mildly. "I always think, though, that if she wants to look down on people the way she does, she ought to start with him. But they always seem to get along fine. She smiles at him lovingly and he smiles back at her and they're as happy as a pair of river clams, apparently."

"They're as happy as a pair of hypocrites," Jason said sarcastically. "She barely speaks to me and she didn't at all before I was married. Acts as if it hurts her, too, and it probably does. I wonder just how people like her get that way anyhow."

"There has to be people like her in every community and there has to be more people who will follow her leadership. They constitute public opinion and it's public opinion that keeps people in line. Without it, there could be no law and order of any kind. Without its influence I would probably beat the missus and starve my horse."

"Maybe you do anyway," Jason told him sourly. "Who's to know down there in that canyon you live in?"

"The missus can take care of herself and the horse shows that I take care of him, my boy, so you can quit worrying about both of them. And now, Janie, we're going home and you look out for yourself. We'll be back over when you need us. Send someone hell for leather when you feel the first pain, don't wait for the second one. And we'll



both sleep with our pants on."

Jason's first intimation that all was not right came when he heard Janie moaning softly in her sleep one warm October night. It had been prearranged that Joe should go for the doctor and stay at the Hale ranch to keep things going in case Janie's labor should be over long, as Jason feared it might be.

When Joe went thundering off through the night, Jason came very near to uttering a prayer for his safety, then turned and entered the house hurriedly. Mrs. Sprague was in the kitchen building a fire in the range and Janie was walking around in her long robe.

"Baby, you ought to be in bed, not down here in the kitchen," he said with concern.

"There's nothing wrong with the kitchen," Mrs. Sprague told him shortly. "She says she's cold and it's warm in here. And don't go heating up the whole house. Pretty soon she'll be too hot and you can't cool the place off this time of year. Let her walk around, if she wants to. 'Twont hurt her none; be good for her. I'll get a bite to eat."

So the three of them sat in the shining kitchen and ate bacon and eggs and flapjacks with lots of good strong coffee.

"Coffee's good for anything," Mrs. Sprague told them. "Hot coffee's better than medicine any time. Drink lots of

it. I made a big pot full."

Jason doubted that Mrs. Sprague had a great deal of medical knowledge, but before the night was over he had cause to bless her devoted kindness. She was everywhere at once, attending the doctor, assisting the Missus and comforting Jason with words and food and drink. She knew the location of everything in the house and went on tireless feet to find it.

Old Doc felt cantankerous on this particular occasion and chose to make things bad for Jason who could content himself neither upstairs nor down and who, as the old man said, made a blasted nuisance of himself.

"Go out and take care of some cattle, man," he roared in exasperation when for the hundredth time Jason had come to the bedroom door to inquire as to whether it was about over and how Janie was.

"I can't hurry this up any. You want your wife to get through in the best possible shape, don't you? I've been standing over her practically ever since I came, haven't I? If there's anything more I can do, tell me and then go away and let me and nature have a chance at this. I know you mean well, Jason," he finished in a gentler tone, "but between you and me this is a difficult birth and it will take time. Janie is a damn brave little woman but she is in pain and she can't help but scream some. In fact, she gets

along better if she does scream; it's a relief, a release. So don't let it worry you. I promise you, she'll be all right. I feel confident that she will be, or I wouldn't promise you so. When Mrs. Sprague and the Missus and me are worn out, we'll need you and we'll need some coffee and something to eat, so don't let the fire go out in the kitchen. You'd feel better if you went out and chopped some wood."

It was evening and Jason was in the kitchen pacing its length when Mrs. Sprague and the Missus hurried in, each carrying a small bundle. The babies were as black as Jason's old slouch hat and the two women proceeded to dip them from a pan of warm water to one of cold and back again time after time, repeating the process until both children started to gasp for breathe.

To Jason the time seemed endless as he watched his tiny sons in horrified stupefaction. He was thinking of Janie and of her disappointment in case the children should not live. He had no sense of relationship to the little specimens of humanity. He thought only that they were Janie's and that she deserved that they should live.

"We have to do this all by ourselves," he heard the Missus saying, "nothing could tear the Doctor away from Janie's side right now, but these children are in a lot worse shape than she is. In God's name, Jason, open up the



reservoir for us and get in more cold water and see that the fire doesn't go out. Bring in a load of wood, too. If these babies are to live, they'll have to be kept warm. It was a breech birth and all the hours it's taken it's a wonder there's any life left in them."

In what seemed to the waiting Jason, hours later, the babies were breathing comfortably in a basket near the fire and the old Doc, his face drawn and gray, came into the room.

"That was a siege, Jason, and no mistake." He rubbed his hand across his face and went on, "I feel like I've never slept in my life and I know my beard has grown another foot longer. But Janie is all right and the babies are, too, it seems like. Hell, you look worse than I do. Go on up and see your wife, but don't talk to her much, she's weak as a kitten. Ask her what she wants for supper and come right down. I'm going to sleep in the best bed you've got in the house tonight and you can stay up and look after everybody. Where's the whiskey? I need a shot now, if I ever did."

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It took Janie a long time to regain the strength she had lost. In fact it seemed to Jason that she would never be well again, that she would never lose the paper whiteness she had had the night after the twins were born. Against

his wishes she insisted on nursing the babies and this further taxed her health.

"My Gosh," Jason told old Doc one day, "can't you give her something to make her gain back her strength? You ought to be able to bottle up some kind of a tonic or roll a few pills she could take. She's as weak as Mrs. Patton's coffee."

"She had a hard time getting through, you have to remember. A breech birth isn't so easy, two of them's worse, and then all the blood she lost. It will take time to replace that blood. See that she eats a lot of meat and drinks more milk. Those twins are pulling her down. We may have to wean them."

"It's what I've been wanting her to do, but she's stubborn as a mule about it. Afraid one or both of them will get sick."

"They're not gaining enough on what she has for them. I'll talk to Mrs. Sprague about putting them on the bottle part of the time."

Mrs. Sprague was exceedingly proud of the Jarrett twins and took great delight in showing them off to visitors. She loved to wash them and dress them in the long clothes that were trimmed with lace and embroidery. She no longer did all the work in the ranch house but had an assistant, Mary Tritt, a homesteader's daughter, who did most of the heavier work

and left Mrs. Sprague free to tend the babies.

"I love them just like they were my own," she told Janie. "They're the prettiest babies I've ever seen in my life. I'll take the best care of them I know how." And unbeknown to Janie she fed them pap in the kitchen until they were fat and rosy and jolly.

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"Your wife's looking better, Jason," the old Doc remarked one evening when the two families were together. "She didn't pull out of it as fast as she ought to have at first, but I think she'll be all right now. She shouldn't have any more young ones for a good long while, though. It takes too much out of her. Some women it does. Maybe she shouldn't ever have any more. She still doesn't have the color she used to."

"There won't be any more, if I can help it," Jason answered. "I thought you said they wouldn't have the colic and that they wouldn't bawl after that medicine you gave them. I'm tired of having the house littered with baby clothes and having Janie up half the night. I'm tired of getting up myself, as far as that goes. They sleep all day and squall all night and I wish they'd grow up so I could sell them on the hoof." He spoke with exasperation, but there was a note of pride, too, in his voice. Not another



rancher in the region had twin sons to turn his property over to when he was done with it himself.

"We'll live here in the big house and we'll build smaller houses for them when they get married and they can take over the ranch," he told Janie. "You and I can travel. I've always wanted to go to California. Always wished I'd been old enough to go there and mine for gold when the rush was on."

"We'll have to think about school for the boys one of these times. It will be a long while before they marry, I hope, but school days for them will be here before we know it," Janie reminded him.

"Oh sure, the school ma'am's sons will have to be well educated. They'll have to mind their manners, too, I suppose. When will you get them out of those damned long clothes and into something sensible? All that lace and embroidery on boys! No wonder they cry. You treat them like girls. They even look like girls." Jason was exasperated.

"They look just like you, Jason," Janie answered him gently. "I'm so proud of them because they do. And we can't shorten their clothes before warm weather, or they'll catch cold. Sometimes I wonder whether you really love them or not. The way you act, I doubt that you do. You never pick them up and hold them unless it's when they cry and you think I'm tired."

"I can't tell them apart for one thing and I never liked little babies for another. They look too much like little birds with their big mouths and their bare heads."

"They're perfectly beautiful," Janie murmured. "The only thing that bothers me is, that I can't very well hold them both at once. You have to love them, dear. Think what fun they'll be when they can follow you around the place."

"That will be fine, having two young ones under my feet, getting into everything around the barn and sheds. I can hardly wait." Jason's sarcasm was lost on Janie. Her pretty head was bent over the cradle where her precious children lay. She watched every day for a first tooth and treasured every expression that resembled a smile.

Jason knew he was being somewhat less than fatherly in his attitude toward the children, but it vexed him to see them get the attention that had formerly been bestowed on him. No longer could Janie ride the range with him or accompany him on trips to town. He had thought that when the children were born he and Janie could relapse into their old routine of being almost constantly together; but he found that his wife was less his than she had been when helplessly pregnant. Now two demanding infants kept them apart and he didn't like it.

Jason's attitude worried Janie and she spoke to the Missus about it. "Of course, he's jealous of the babies,

though he probably doesn't know it. And how can you blame him? You haven't been over to our place since they were born. From what I can see you haven't been on a horse in all that time either, or gone to town with him. It's always the babies with you. Remember that Jason used to be first, but now he feels as though he's been replaced, or displaced. Give him a little attention and he'll get interested in the children. Share them together, I'd say. Go some place with him and leave them at home. It won't hurt them. Nobody could take better care of them than Mrs. Sprague does; and they're too little to miss you anyhow. Now is the time to leave them at home. They can't get into trouble and they won't know you're gone." The Missus looked out across the river to the bluffs beyond and mused, "Sometimes I wish we had had children; but the doctor didn't think we should. He says that after children are born it's everybody's duty to take the best possible care of them and to try and make them happy, but he can't see any reason why responsible, respectable people should deliberately bring children into a world like this one. He says that personally he would rather not have lived and that he doesn't thank his parents for bringing him into the world. I can't say that I'd want to live my life over again but I don't believe I can honestly say I'm sorry I've lived. If I could go back, though, I would change some things. But then, so would everybody else. The Doctor doesn't believe in an after life, you know, or



at least he says he doesn't."

Janie was horrified at the Missus' assertion and turning her face toward the older woman she started to speak, but the Missus forestalled her with, "Don't say it. I think he only tells me that to worry me and it doesn't worry me much any more. A belief like that doesn't make anybody happy, certainly; and if he wants to be miserable, why let him be. The Doctor likes to be a character, you know."

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When the Jarret twins were five years old, they were able to ride their ponies over the ranch lands and accompanied Jason on trips he made from one part of the place to another. Jason was inordinately proud of them and insisted that they were the smartest young ones he had ever seen.

"It won't be long now till they can take over the place," he would tell Janie.

"I'll teach them to rope and ride and brand and work cattle. They won't know anything else. They'll be fixed for life, the little devils. What a chance they've got! What would I give if my old man had started me out like that instead of giving me a kick in the pants every time he passed me."

"They're still babies," Janie would insist. "Don't

be in too big a hurry to set them at a man's work and give them a man's responsibilities."

"They've got to take responsibility," Jason said stubbornly. "They have to amount to something. I won't rest in my grave if they squander what I leave them, after the way I've worked and struggled to get this ranch together. I hope they'll get along so they can share it and not want to divide it up. There isn't a ranch in the country to compare to this. All the water anybody could want, all the trees we need to furnish fuel, miles of grass to feed the cattle and saddle horses. There isn't anything wanting, not anything at all."

"Yes, it is a beautiful home," Janie agreed musingly, and turned from the shaded north terrace where they were standing to survey the house. "I like your house better every day, Jason. No other house around is like it. Nobody else has a stairway like ours or a fanlight or such windows or porches. It's perfect."

"I'm glad you like it, Honey. I thought about it long years before I had any reason to build it. I hope the boys will be careful who they marry. The wrong woman can ruin a man."

He, too, was looking at the house and after a while he remarked, "You've always seemed to be happy here. Are you? You've never said you wanted to go back home on a

visit, or anything."

"The West is home, Jason. There isn't anybody in Ohio I care about any more. You know I hardly write to the Uncles and Aunts. They didn't have much time for me after my father died, you see. Daddy Harl treated me as well, or better, than any of them did. Of course, they needed all they had for their own children, I can understand that now. Please God our children may have both their parents until they're grown, at least."

"Well, I'm sure I'll be around," Jason assured her. "And you take care of yourself. You've never been the same since the boys were born. You've never since had the same spirit you had when we were married."

"I feel better, though, and the boys were worth it. They're worth everything, Jason. I never knew what happiness was till we had them."

"I wouldn't say that, Sweetheart. I thought we were pretty happy before they came along. I've always been happier on this place than I ever was any where else. It's a good place to live and an easy place to make a living, if a man will only half try."

Janie agreed with him and when he walked out to the corrals, she entered the house and started sewing. She sometimes wished there wasn't so much of it to do or that she could get somebody to help her, but she was never pleased



with the result when she did. She liked her dresses to fit nicely and most of the women in the vicinity who sewed were not particular enough to suit her. Then there were curtains and linens for the house and clothes for the boys who outgrew and wore out their clothing nearly as fast as she could make it.

Mrs. Sprague and Mary Tritt did the cooking and kept the house clean and shining. Jason was always willing to spend money on the house that it might be well furnished and beautifully kept.

"Don't stint on the house, Janie," he insisted, "We're out here away from any place, and not many people see how we live, but I want the place to look good. I've lived in cabins, and dugouts, and bunkhouses most of my life. I want my young ones to grow up in a decent home and to have good manners. This country will fill up with people one of these days and I want our boys to be on the top of the heap. I don't want them to be ashamed and not know how to act when they're in somebody's house or when they're in a crowd. We'll have to take them more places, too; so they'll be used to people."

Janie was happy in the house or anywhere on the ranch and now as she sat sewing she could look across the sloping lawn, past the spring and down to the river--the beautiful river lined with cottonwoods and elms that furnished water

for the livestock, wood for the fires and a pleasant place to wade and swim in summer.

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Jason had to make a trip to Kansas City in March and the twins admired him immensely as he came down the stairs in his fine broadcloth suit and soft leather boots.

"I hope I'm as tall as Father when I grow up," Dick whispered to his brother and the other agreed ardently that it was his wish, too.

Janie was behind Jason a little distance and the boys watched their parents as they came toward them. Janie's bright hair was on top of her head in a soft pompadour and her dress was of a bright pink percale that matched the color in her cheeks. Jason had kissed her soundly in goodbye and the color still flooded her face.

"Take good care of Mamma while I'm gone," Jason told the small boys and they promised gravely and looked very solemn while he got in the buggy with Joe and started off toward Fort Hays.

Janie stayed outdoors all morning with the children because she hated to go in the house. It would be intolerably lonesome while Jason was gone. Mrs. Sprague and Mary would let down on the cooking and get careless with the housework if she wasn't on her toes. She wondered idly why

this should be and decided that it was because she herself became slack while Jason was away. It didn't matter whether the meals were on time or not and she usually sat up and read until midnight because she dreaded to go upstairs and face the prospect of a sleepless night. There was nothing she actually needed to fear when Jason was gone, but she could always imagine that someone was slipping up the stairs.

It was on nights like these, too, that she remembered stories Jason had told of the frontier as he had known it in earlier days.

There was one story that never failed to come to mind when she lay sleepless and that was about the Negro who had come to Vale from no one knew where, and had helped in the building of the stone houses and the store. He had lived in a shack near the river during his first winter in the vicinity while he waited for spring and more work at mixing mortar.

"Nobody ever went near to see how he was, except maybe some of the town young ones who would tease him and steal the fish off his lines and rob his traps," Jason had explained. "It was darned cold that winter and about Christmas some young folks were skating near where he lived and found him lying dead on the ice. And do you know what, those good Christians over there did? They threw some dirt over him and let him lay there and rot. The dogs dug him out and right now his bones are kicking around town. Old



man Mason's got his skull hanging up in his barn."

The story had sickened and horrified Janie and it exasperated her to know that it would rise and haunt her sleep tonight. She resolved then and there that while Jason was gone she and the other two women would give the house a thorough cleaning and at night everybody would be so tired they would sleep without any trouble.

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It was nearly noon when Jason stepped off the train at Fort Hays a week later. Joe was there with the buggy and the two ate a hurried dinner in a restaurant on North Main knowing that it would be dark long before they reached the ranch.

Joe, usually talkative and ready for several rounds of drinks, appeared cold sober and had almost nothing to say while they were in town or on the way home. He said there wasn't anything that Janie needed and that they could leave right away. He sat looking straight ahead as the horses followed the trail of their own accord at a brisk trot. After some ten miles of this, Jason was moved to ask, "Well, how are things at the ranch, Joe. What's going on out there, anyway?"

Without moving his eyes from the trail Joe answered carefully, "There's trouble at the ranch, Jason. Hell's to

pay. A woman with a half-grown boy drove in there a week ago and said she was Huldý Cummins and that she was lookin' for you."

Jason's face turned brick red, then faded to a tallow color. He was quiet so long that Joe glanced at him keenly and then lapsed into silence. A silence that was unbroken until the lights of the house loomed up in the distance and Jason said, "Take the team on up to the barn, Joe, and put them away. I'll go in the front."

Jason got out of the buggy slowly and mounted the stone steps that led to the wide front porch. He entered through the graceful doorway that was his pride and when he had closed the heavy front door he noticed the moonbeams that fell on the stairs through the fanlight overhead.

From where she was standing by the bay window, Janie turned to face him and his heart was wrung by the look on her sick, white face. To gain time, he asked quickly, "Where are the boys?"

"They're in bed. Jason, can't you tell me that what that woman says isn't true?"

It was noticeable that Jason did not inquire who the woman was nor what she had been saying and that his reply was guarded.

"I don't know what people have been telling. I just got home."

"Joe must have told you that a woman came here five days ago and said she was your wife; that you were married in southern Illinois and that you went away and left her and her little boy. There was more; about some life insurance that didn't make sense to me. She talked until I finally told her she had to get out of the house. I had to threaten that I'd have some of the boys put her out if she didn't go. She's been out to the bunkhouse talking, too. Jason, unless you can tell me that what she says isn't true, I intend to take my children and leave here in the morning."

In spite of himself a stubborn pride rose in Jason. Janie was not reacting just as he had expected that she would. He had supposed that Huldry would be his problem and that Janie would stick by him; and here she was delivering an ultimatum. So he said stiffly, "That's just as you prefer, Madam. You can go when you please, but my children aren't leaving the place. I intend to take care of them and I intend to do it here in their own home."

Jason's words were not what Janie had expected from him either. She scarcely knew what she had thought he would say, but she had certainly not supposed he would tell her she might leave with no more argument than he was putting up.

Jason had turned toward the stairs when Janie said brokenly, "Jason, how could you treat me so? How could you?



Why did you change your name when you came out here? Why are you Jason Jarrett instead of Jason Cummins? Why did you marry me when you were already married?"

"I'm not going into all that tonight. I'm tired. Come on up to bed."

"The children are asleep down here, Jason. I'll spend the night with them. And tomorrow we're going away."

"You'll find out about that, too, My Girl. What are you going to use for money, if it's any of my business?"

"You mean then, that you won't provide for us?"  
There was a catch in Janie's voice.

"I mean that I'll provide for you, and gladly, as long as you live here with me; I mean that I intend to take care of my children, but I intend to do it in my own house. If you want to leave, I can't keep you, but the boys stay here with me."

"You haven't given me the benefit of the doubt in any of this. Some woman, a total stranger to you, comes in here and starts accusing me of everything in the book. What do you do? You swallow every word of it. Did you ask her for proof of any of this? I doubt it. But did you?"

"Well, no, I---"

"You've always been willing to believe the worst about me, if this is the worst. Well, go right ahead and believe it. Lap it all up. Enjoy yourself. You're a loyal,

devoted wife. I'm proud of you." Jason had worked himself into a lather of self-pity but his words and tone of voice carried little conviction. He would have been hard put to cite any specific instance of disloyalty on Janie's part, but it pleased him to put her on the defensive.

"I guess I ought to be proud of you, too, Jason. But somehow I'm not. That woman acted too much like she was telling the truth for me to think that she wasn't." Janie's clear voice was tinged with sarcasm.

"Well, as I said before, enjoy yourself. And pleasant dreams."

"Good night, Jason." Janie's voice held a note of farewell and Jason caught the inflection; but he didn't want to commit himself any further that night. He needed time to think. A lot of time.

Janie went to bed, but not to sleep.

In the morning, Jason came downstairs and seated himself at the breakfast table as though nothing had happened. The little boys came in, greeted him boisterously, and were served the hearty breakfast Mrs. Sprague had prepared. As usual, Jason bragged on her cooking and watched the woman's face as she thanked him. Mrs. Sprague's plain countenance wore a closed, watchful look and Jason would have given much to know what she was thinking.

He attended to the usual tasks about the ranch that day and took time off to ride out over the range to see how

the grass was coming along. It had always rested him to ride over the prairie with a good horse between his knees and the Kansas sun beating down on his back.

Today, though, was different. He had wanted to get away from the house where Janie, with a white, setface, ignored him completely and the twins, subdued by their mother's attitude, played quietly together in the shelter of the porches.

Down by the spring was something that made him sweat and swear and fume inwardly--a covered wagon with over-jets, the tail gate let down for a chuck board and a team of raw boned horses tied to nearby picket pins. A dingy wash was spread on the low-growing willows that surrounded the spring and a tall, awkward woman in faded gingham made herself obvious by carrying water, by chopping wood, by leading the horses down to the river for a drink, and by yelling loudly at the half grown lout of a boy who amused himself by throwing sticks into the stream for a shaggy ill-kept dog to retrieve.

Jason had no intention of allowing himself to get into either an argument or an interview with Huldy. He hoped vaguely that if he pretended she wasn't around, she might leave. As he hoped this, however, he knew it was a vain thought. Huldy, he remembered, once she got an idea in her head, carried it through to completion.

His thoughts churned restlessly as he rode over a



landscape that, so far as he was concerned, might have been the Sahara. He failed to note the springing grass and the little wind flowers that covered the level places with a carpet of blue. His ears were not in tune with the quail and the prairie chickens that were mating and nesting in the taller grasses of the draws. Even the sleek black cattle aroused no interest in him. He was faced with the problem of finding a way to keep Janie and at the same time to send Huldy packing.

Jason prided himself on a certain ingenuity he possessed for getting out of complicated situations, but today he could think of nothing. Janie's attitude toward the whole thing had astounded him. He had looked for tears, for hysterics, for recriminations, but not for cold, white silence.

He ate his dinner at the camp on Brush Creek and was glad the news of Huldy's coming had not spread that far and that he could act naturally with the men.

On the way back to the ranch, he again tried to arrive at a solution of the problem that faced him, but succeeded only in working himself into a towering rage at Huldy.

Jason crossed the river at the ford below the one where Huldy was camped and rode through a long draw that allowed him to approach the barn on the side away from the house and the spring. He had decided that he would make his

peace with Janie first and then deal with Huldý accordingly. He knew that Janie was fair minded and he felt that if he told her everything she would give him a chance to unravel his tangled affairs and start over again.

"I'll make a clean breast of my whole damned shoddy life," he decided reluctantly. "I won't hold anything back, and then I'll ask her to forgive me and let me have another chance. It may take a while to bring her around, but I believe I can do it. After all, she loves me and she loves the boys and last night was the first time I ever ripped into her about anything. It was the first time I ever gave her an unkind word, so help me."

Jason had dismounted from his horse and was ready to lead the animal into the stable when Huldý, with the boy in her wake, loomed up in the door ahead of him. Instantly he knew that she had been lying in wait to confront him and his gorge rose dangerously.

"Well, Jason Cummins," Huldý began stridently. "Explain yourself, if you can."

"I don't do much explaining these days, Ma'am," Jason answered with deceptive mildness as he looked at her with the clear eyes of a man who knows a woman completely and sees nothing to admire.

Huldý had changed but little with the years. Her sandy hair still had the texture of sun bleached straw and

the long trip across the plains had toughened and reddened her skin to the consistency of parched leather. Jason thought that she looked like a lank old greyhound after a long, hard chase.

"So you're Jason Jarrett now," she sneered at him maliciously. "You've changed your name, got you a young woman to live with and set yourself up as a respectable rancher since I saw you last. Done all right for yourself, too, it looks like. Well I'm here to see that you do right by me and this boy."

Jason's voice was mild and his glance level as he asked quietly, "Just what do you have in mind anyway? Just why are you here?"

"Why am I here? What do I want? What would you think I made a trip like this for? I've come out here to claim my rights as your lawful, legal wife. You took that insurance money and said you'd send for me as soon as you got settled. Well, it looks to me like you're pretty well settled; but if Uncle Nate Barton hadn't seen you in Kansas City the last time he shipped cattle there and if I hadn't traced you through one of the commission houses, I'd never have seen hide nor hair of you again."

Jason's voice was still mild and his manner still calm. "You're right, you wouldn't. But what's this about insurance money? I don't seem to understand what you're



referring to."

"I'm referring to the insurance money I collected after you went away."

"But why would you collect my insurance? What reason did you have to think I was dead?"

"You're tryin' to act like you don't know anything about this? Tryin' to pretend you didn't leave your clothes on the river bank so it would look like you had drowned? Tryin' to pretend you didn't come back and get that six thousand dollars I give you either, I suppose?"

If Jason had not been in such desperate straits himself, he could have been amused at the fine frenzy Huldry had worked herself into. As it was he reiterated patiently, "I told you before I don't know anything about it. I'm not in the habit of leaving my clothes on river banks and going around without them. What is this story you've concocted anyway, and what do you think you'll gain by it, you damned old renegade?"

"Well, that's a new wrinkle on my short horn! You're denyin' the whole thing, ain't you? You're tryin' to say that you didn't come back for that money! That I didn't give you six thousand of the ten I collected for your drownin'! Jason Cummins, I can prove you came back, and I hope you go to prison for it."

"If anyone goes to prison, it will undoubtedly be you."

How can you prove I came back? Would the insurance company have paid off, if they had thought I was still alive? Not at all. They don't do business that way."

"If you didn't come back, if I didn't give you the money, how was you able to buy this much land, to get all these cattle you've got here, to put up these buildings? Just answer me that."

"Well, it's none of your damned business, but I won it at cards. Where the hell else would I get it? Your story about the insurance money will never wash. You're in on that alone and just off-hand, without studying the matter or giving it any particular thought, I would say that you have obtained money under false pretenses and that you had better go back to Illinois and try to get the matter straightened out before the company catches up with you. And now, get out of here. Take that lout of yours and leave." Jason was tired of bluffing and brawling with Huldy. He had some important business of his own to take care of at the house.

But Huldy had gained her second wind and now she started in again. "I'm not leaving here, Jason. I didn't make this trip out here for nothing. I'm moving into that fine house, and you're going to acknowledge me as your legal, lawful wife and this child as yours, too."

"How do you think you'll bring all that about, I'd like to know? Just you try moving into that house, and I'll

tear you limb from limb and wring your neck to boot." With an angry gesture, Jason motioned Huldý and the boy aside and led his horse on into the stable and tied him to a manger.

Before starting back to her wagon, Huldý was impelled to fire a parting shot. "Well, you're not through with me, Mr. Cummins. You haven't heard the last of this, I can tell you. And you've got a big surprise waiting for you when you walk into that house you built with my money."

"For God's sake, woman," Jason told her wearily, "you never did know when to shut up. If I had killed you every time I've wanted to--." He left the sentence unfinished and went toward the house.

Jason knew he was in no frame of mind to thresh out the future with Janie. Things had been happening too fast. He couldn't remember half the arguments he had assembled on his morning's ride and decided to let the whole affair rest until the next day.

"That damned old rip has always managed to ruin everything for me," he told himself furiously as he walked toward the house. "Wouldn't I love to see her in some of the hot water she's got me into? And by damn, I will too. Just give me a little time and one way or another I'll take care of her."

As he went up the steps to the front door, he thought ruefully that now, more than at any time in his life, he



needed a woman to give him counsel and comfort and he laughed sardonically when he remembered that at least two of the women who had figured largely in his life were ready to cut his throat.

It was hard for Jason to believe that the time had come when he hated to enter his own door, hated to turn the knob and walk into the house he had designed and planned and built in the expectation of so much happiness.

"Don't be a damned fool," he muttered, "nothing could be worse than what you've just been through. Janie won't jump onto you and try to out cuss and out talk you, and no matter if she did you could forgive her for it."

Jason opened the door, walked in and closed it and started for the sitting room before he noticed that anything was wrong. He stopped suddenly in the middle of the floor and the utter silence of an empty house struck him full in the face.

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"If you want to leave here, I'll help you. I can drive a team as well as a man. You've been good to me and I'll do anything I can for you." Mrs. Sprague had come into the sitting room where Janie sat looking at the new green of the cottonwoods and elms along the river. She was thinking that it was in just such a Spring as this that she and Jason

had been married. Her face was turned toward the west windows; she could not bear to look eastward where Huldry was camped and where the boy slouched about in patched and faded clothes that were much too small for him.

"Jason's left. He rode away on Patch and that ought to mean that he's gone for all day," Mrs. Sprague continued. "Come on in the kitchen and eat your breakfast and then decide where you want to go and I'll take you."

"I've been thinking what I ought to do," Janie answered. "The house just north of the store belongs to Daddy Harl and no one's living there now. Maybe he would let me move into it. I believe he would. Why don't you take me to Vale? I've been thinking that I could sew for people and make a living that way. You get a team and the light wagon ready now and we'll go. I'll have to hurry because Jason will never let me take the boys. He may come after them anyway. I don't want to live in Vale, but it will do for a while till I can think of something else. My head aches so now that I can't figure out what I should do." But her head wasn't so bad that she didn't realize that Mrs. Sprague had listened to her conversation with Jason the night before.

A half hour later, when Mrs. Sprague drove around to the back door, Janie had her clothes and the twins' packed and had ready a list of the things she wanted to take with her. The two women loaded into the wagon Janie's sewing

machine, a small laundry stove from the basement, tubs and a washboard, a little table and three chairs, a bedstead and a cot, some cooking utensils and various pans, buckets, and linens that Janie knew she would need. The loaded wagon reminded her of the one she and Jason had driven out to the ranch after their marriage and she thought tearfully of the trip across the prairie from Fort Hays to the Saline.

"Why did it have to be like this? Why did it all have to happen?" was the refrain that rang in her head as the horses trotted along the road to Vale. "I'm right back where I started from and a lot worse off. I have two children and I'm not even married. My health is gone but I'll have to make a living for us and I don't know how I can face the people in Vale or anywhere else. And I loved Jason so much. I can never care for anyone again, even if some man wanted to marry me. Why did this have to happen?"

The thought of having to explain the situation to Daddy Harl was a dark cloud that hung over her all the way along the trail into town and she had never appreciated Mrs. Sprague so much as she did when that good woman drove up in front of the store and said briefly,

"I'll go in and talk to the old man. You stay out here and hold the horses. If you've got enough money to pay a month's rent, he'll let you have the house all right.

Janie did have some money and she thought tiredly



that Daddy could have it all, if she wouldn't have to answer a lot of questions. As it turned out, Mrs. Sprague got to answer the questions, but she also rented the house for a month and came out of the store grimly holding a receipt for the money.

"The old coot had to know all the particulars, of course. As though the news hadn't already got up here! I don't know who he thought he was fooling. Well, we'd better get this stuff off the wagon because if Jason catches up with us, he'll just drive it back home and leave the two of us sitting here."

The little two-room house, built of thin slabs of cream colored limestone, stood just north of Daddy's store and the town well. When the place had been swept out and the few pieces of furniture set up, the bare floors and whitewashed walls looked so bleak and unfriendly that Janie with difficulty kept back her tears.

"I'll have to go on now, Janie," Mrs. Sprague said briskly after she and Janie and the two little boys had eaten a hurried lunch and gone out into the yard. "I don't want to run into Jason, if I can help it. I'll go around by my daughter's house and she can come after me when I've got the team and wagon back to the ranch. Goodbye, Janie. I'm sorry things turned out like this for you and I'll do anything I can for you, remember. Kiss the boys for me when

you go in the house. I can't bear to tell them goodbye. It's too bad to love someone else's children like that, do you know it?"

The wagon rattled away down the sandy street and Janie watched it disappear around the bend in the trail south of town. Then she entered the tiny house that drowsed in the shade of the cottonwoods.

When night descended on the little town, shut in by its wall of hills, a terrible loneliness overcame Janie. In the bluffs along the river the coyotes yipped and yapped and howled hideously, the hoot owls made a night of it, and small, dead branches from the cottonwoods fell on the roof.

A night is short enough, if you sleep through the whole of it, but to Janie, alone with her two children, it seemed that day would never come. Time after time, she lived over the past ten years. "It was a fool's paradise," she told herself sternly, "now I'll have to live life as it actually is, and it won't be easy. I never until now thought that Jason was mean and little about money. I wouldn't have believed that he would turn me away without a cent. The few dollars I've got won't last long with three of us to feed."

Word soon got out that Jason Jarrett's wife had left him, that she was living in Vale, and that she intended to support herself and her children by sewing for people. Everyone agreed that she was good and brave and deserving

and everyone who could afford it, brought in some sewing for her to do. Of course, it was not curiosity that prompted them to do this or a desire to gloat over Janie in her time of stress. It was simply a desire to help a worthy young woman who had been duped and tricked by a ruthless, debased man.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick, Mrs. Patton, Mrs. Pool, Mrs. Spencer and Edith, Mrs. Kellog, and Mrs. Tritt. All of them came and brought their sewing until Janie wondered where she would put it and when she would ever find time to get it done.

It was not in Janie's nature to deride or bemean anyone and, least of all, Jason. So when the ladies brought their sewing and sat down to tell her what they thought of the way she had been treated, Janie quietly directed the conversation into other channels.

"There is some dreadful mistake that I can't understand and that it will take time to straighten out," she would explain carefully. "And, of course, Jason is the children's father; and anyway I don't want to discuss it," she would finish firmly when anyone insisted on giving Jason a good tongue lashing.

"She thinks she'll get him back again and everything will be the same as it was before," Mrs. Patton told her husband after her exploratory trip to the little stone house. "Well, I don't know how it will all turn out, but if she



goes back down there to that ranch to live with Jason Jarrett, I can assure you not a woman in this country will ever speak to her again. I'll see to that. She'd better remember that she's on the mercy of the people in this community and that if they don't give her their sewing to do, she'll starve."

Mr. Patton assented to this last remark readily enough and thought that it was too bad the little lady was so reduced in circumstances and was forced to live alone with her two children in such a mean little house with not a relative within hundreds of miles and no man to protect her. He began to think that perhaps there might be something he could do to relieve her loneliness.

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To Janie the days lived in Vale were endless, and yet they were not long enough in which to do enough sewing that she would ever be free from the fear of want. Looking ahead, down the long thread of life, she could see little in store for herself and her boys but semi-genteel poverty as long as she stayed in Vale and nothing much better when and if she left the place.

"It doesn't seem possible a person's life could change so completely in such a short time," she would muse despondently as she sat at her sewing. "One day you're a happy wife and mother with a good home and a prosperous

future in sight for your children, and the next day you're little better than a fallen woman without a father for your boys. And that's what hurts the most--to think that the boys won't have an education or any way to make a living except by the hardest kind of work."

For the first time Janie realized that she had hoped her boys might hold positions as bankers, doctors, or perhaps ministers; that she had wanted them to occupy a station in life above the one in which she and Jason had lived.

"I don't understand that, either," she thought. "Undoubtedly I was perfectly satisfied at the ranch. I didn't need anyone but Jason and the twins to make me happy. I loved everything about the place--the river, the trees, the house, the cattle and horses, everything. And now it's all gone forever. I wish I could hate Jason for what he's done to me, but somehow I can't."

Dick and Dave missed their father and thought that he might come riding in any day on Patch or Belle. They talked about him so much and asked so many questions as to why they were living in Vale and Father was at the ranch that Janie despaired of making them understand the situation and quit trying to give them sensible or plausible answers. After all, how could you explain to a five-year-old boy that his father was a bigamist and that his mother was unwed?

At first Janie had thought she would not attend church

or Sunday school, but Mrs. Patton and Mrs. Fitzpatrick stopped by for her one morning and insisted that she must come, that the congregation would be incomplete without her presence and that everyone expected her and the twins to be there. And apparently everyone did expect, or at least hope, that she would come. When the ordeal was over, Janie, too, was glad she had gone and prayed devoutly that she would never again have to face her neighbors so soon after having been involved in a scandal.

Everyone had looked her over thoroughly; apparently in the expectation that she would be pregnant. They had searched her face for signs of emotion and had taken inventory of her clothes to see if she was as well dressed as usual.

When Janie returned to the privacy of the little stone house, she felt as though she could not face life any longer. Always before there had been someone to rely upon, her father, her grandmother, Jason. Now there was no one. She was utterly alone in the world and her children were dependent upon her. She felt that she should not cry where the boys could see her, but in a house as small as this one there was seldom a time when she was alone in either of the two little rooms upstairs or the basement where she did her washing. It seemed to her that the boys were continually underfoot, that they were eternally interrupting her at her



sewing, and that she would have given anything just for a peaceful hour in which to read or to entertain a congenial visitor. But the twins missed their father and clung to her for comfort and companionship.

There was water to carry, wood to chop, washing to do on the board, clothes to iron, ground to be spaded up for a garden, trips to be made to the store for groceries, meals to cook and dishes to wash, besides floors to sweep and scrub. She often thought that even after her best efforts, the place still looked mean and bare.

When she first came to Vale, Janie had thought that Jason might come in the yard some day and take the children from her; drive back to the ranch with them and leave her alone in the bleak little town. But after a month, with no word from him, she felt that her claim on the boys was secure and she wondered how he could give them up as easily as he had.

She often looked toward the street and the store thinking that he might ride past or that his horse would be tied to the hitch rack in front of Daddy Harl's. But she knew in her heart that he would never come near her or near the town unless she sent for him. Jason was a proud man and she finally realized the depth of his humiliation when he knew that she had left him and taken their children with her.

The evenings were the worst part of the day. It was

then that Dick and Dave were tired of playing by themselves and wanted the attention of an adult. At the ranch this had been the best time of all when Jason, the day's work done, would hurry eagerly to the house to spend the hours before bedtime with his family. And after supper was over and the boys had had a final romp with their father and were at last upstairs asleep, Janie would confide the day's happenings to Jason and share with him the cute things the twins had said and perhaps relate some small bit of gossip she had picked up when Mrs. Patton or Mrs. Kirkpatrick came for a visit.

Now there was no one to visit with, no one to talk things over with, no one to go to for advice.

As time wore on, Janie came to realize that she needed advice, too, because it was becoming more and more evident that she would not be able to make a living by sewing. Even her fond mother's eyes could see that the boys were not thriving on the food she was able to afford for them. Their bodies were no longer round and fat and she could not attribute their lank appearance to the fact that they were growing so fast. She had to admit that they needed more meat and milk and eggs than she could buy with the money she took in from sewing.

"There are so many other things to do that I can't spend enough time at the machine, and if I could, my eyes

wouldn't stand for it. I believe I must have a headache at least half the time and I'm sure it comes from my eyes," she thought and felt panicky when she realized that sewing was the only thing she knew how to do for a living and that she could not do that with poor eyesight.

Janie's thoughts often went to the day when Huldry and the boy came to the ranch. Jason had been gone for more than a week and the twins were anxious for his return. To occupy the time, she had been sitting with them in front of the big bay window while she read from one of Grimm's collections of fairy tales.

"And the big, bad wolf ate Red Riding Hood up," she read, but the boys were not listening. Their attention had been attracted to a wagon that was crossing the ford below the spring.

"Who do you suppose it is?" Dick asked eagerly. "Oh gosh I wish it was Father, but he wouldn't come home from Kansas City in a covered wagon." Dick laughed delightedly at the idea and Dave, the more serious of the two, joined in with a chuckle.

"It's just some people on their way to Vale," Janie told the boys and as the wagon drew to a stop in front of the house she added, "They're stopping to ask the way, I suppose. Now don't run out of the house as though you had never seen anyone before. Give the lady a chance to knock



at the door and we'll go open it."

Janie had looked especially well this particular morning. It was one of her good days when she felt rested and cheerful and when she opened the door she made a pretty picture framed in its wide opening with a handsome little boy on either side of her.

"Is this the Circle C Ranch?" the woman asked and Janie answered that it was.

"Is the owner at home?" the woman questioned again and Janie explained, "My husband is in Kansas City but he will be home in a few days. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I'm Mrs. Huldy Cummins," the woman told Janie. "My son and me would like to camp at your spring for a day or two till the horses get rested up. We've come a long ways and we're all tired."

It was a rather unusual request and Janie doubted that Jason would approve, but the woman did look tired and there was no question but that the horses were worn out.

"If it's only for a few days, perhaps you may," Janie said. "Though I don't know what my husband will have to say about it. We only use the spring water when the cisterns go dry or when the river gets low, but Jason's very careful to keep it clean so the water will be good when we do need it. We did allow people to camp there, but some of them were

careless about throwing trash in the spring so my husband stopped them from staying there. I'm sure, though, that you will be careful."

"No, I won't throw any trash in the spring," the woman assured her and started back to the wagon.

Janie's conscience assailed her for not asking the woman into the house and giving her a hot meal, but the day was warm and windless and there was actually no reason why she should have asked the woman and the boy to come in. But she did call after her,

"Is there anything I can get for you, anything you need?"

"No," the woman answered, "we've got along with what we've had so far, I reckon everything will last a few days longer."

"I didn't like that woman," Dick told his mother when the door was closed.

"But why, darling?"

"I just didn't like her. I didn't like the way she looked around at things and licked her lips."

"She did have an odd way about her," Janie agreed. "But she'll be gone in a few days, so we won't think about her any more."

It was the next morning, while Janie was sitting at the bay window with some mending, that Huldý walked in

without the formality of knocking and announced who she was.

That had been a month ago. Now spring was slipping toward summer and there was still no word from Jason. Janie was far too proud to ask anyone about him or whether he and Huldry were living together at the ranch. They could have been for all she knew.

Janie laid aside her sewing and asked the twins if they would like to go with her for a walk along the river. She felt that she had to get away from the little house and the town that was closing her in like the jaws of a trap.

"This is just like being at the ranch," yelled Dick excitedly when they had followed the trail that led west from the town and had dropped over the rise of ground that shut it from view. "Mother let us go wading," he pleaded and without waiting for permission he started to remove his shoes.

"Let's go on around the bend a little farther," Janie suggested and pulled them away from the ford where people would be crossing the river. She didn't want to see anyone or talk to anybody. She needed time for reflection, time to get her thoughts in order and plan how she should manage to make a living for herself and her children.

It was pleasant walking around the bend in the warm sunshine. The boys waded where the water was shallow enough and walked beside Janie along the sandy shore of the stream



when it deepened. They found a sandbar where the mussels fed with their shells partly open and the minnows played in the shallows. There was the fragrant smell of new-turned earth where Mr. Dean was plowing the rich bottomland near the river. The boys walked in the furrows of fresh soil and squealed when they stepped on a grub worm. Mr. Dean stopped his horses for a rest and talked to the three of them about the weather, the chance of a rain, and the prospects for a crop.

Then Mr. Dean giddapped to his horses and Janie and the boys followed the bend on around to where the river formed a loop and nearly met itself just east of the town. They found a water snake and a bird's nest, they caught some little frogs, picked a few green fruits from the sand plum bushes, stared at the coffee bean tree that was a rarity in the country and grew near the upper ford. When they came to the trail that led into town, the boys were so tired that Janie felt she really should carry them, but realizing that it was impossible, she walked along slowly holding their hands in hers. As the three of them neared Mrs. Peters' door, she came out on her porch and said kindly,

"Can't you come in a while, Mrs. Jarrett? You must be tired and the boys look fagged out." The children wanted to stop, so Janie answered,

"The boys can stay for a while. But I believe I'd

better go on home and start a fire. It's 'way past our supper time."

"I've got some cookies for them," kindly Mrs. Peters said, "and I'll send them home in half an hour."

Mr. Patton had just walked out of Daddy Harl's store and had paused a moment on the high porch to look up and down the trail. He saw Janie coming up the street alone and decided that this would be a good time to inquire for the dress his wife was having made.

He was a tall, good-looking man with dark hair and eyes, a fine figure and a way of carrying himself that betokened good blood. He was in his middle forties and considered himself irresistible to women of all ages. As Janie approached, Mr. Patton went to his buggy and took more time than was necessary in depositing his few purchases. When she was nearly alongside the buggy, he arranged his face in a sanctimonious smirk, raised his hat deferentially, and said cordially,

"Good evening, Mrs. Jarrett, how are you and the little boys and is Mrs. Patton's dress about done?"

"It is finished," Janie told him thankfully, thinking of the two dollars she would receive and which she needed so badly.

"I'll take it home then," Mr. Patton told her and they walked toward the little house together.

Janie had not counted on Mr. Patton's coming into the house, but when he held the screen door open for her and followed her in, it would have seemed uncivil not to offer him a chair. He refused the chair, saying that he must hurry on, so she stepped into the bedroom to get the dress.

The shelf on which the dress lay was almost higher than Janie could reach, but by dint of stretching and standing on tiptoes she had managed to reach it when she realized that Mr. Patton was behind her. She turned with the dress in her finger tips just in time to step into his waiting arms.

Janie was aghast. She remembered all the stories she had refused to believe about Mr. Patton. The children would not be home for another fifteen or twenty minutes. In the meantime, if Mr. Patton lived up to his reputation, anything could happen. If Jason were only here. If---. Mr. Patton was speaking against her ear,

"Darling, don't you know I've loved you for years? Surely you care for me a little. You've always been so kind and friendly; I couldn't have misunderstood you."

Janie had had time to gather her inner forces and collect her thoughts. She had also gotten an arm and hand free; and now she delivered a stinging slap to Mr. Patton's cheek. He stepped back in apparent surprise; and just then the door slammed.



Mrs. Spencer had to have the dress Janie was making for her. She knocked two or three times, without effect, and now she pulled the screen open and walked in.

In the fading light of day, the scene in the bedroom took on its worst implication. In fact, Mrs. Spencer almost wished that she might have delayed her appearance by just a few seconds in order to have something more tangible to tell the other ladies. As it was, she did the best she could with what had come to hand.

"I can't believe a thing like that would happen without some cause," she said virtuously when she was giving an account of the incident, "no man has ever insulted me and I don't expect that one ever will. But then I've never led anyone on, either, the way Mrs. Jarrett does with that smile of hers. Look at the way she encouraged Glen to believe she would marry him and then jilted him practically at the altar for Jason Jarrett. That shows what kind of woman she is. And I think she's getting just what's coming to her. Now the rest of you can do as you please; but I refuse to patronize a woman like that any more."

All the other members of the Ladies Aid agreed that Mrs. Spencer was exactly right and that a woman like Janie should certainly not be encouraged.

The ladies prided themselves on the fact that they were not gossips in the ordinary sense of the word because

they never repeated scandalous stories outside their own circle. They were above spreading scandal where the common herd would hear of it and gain some crumb of comfort therefrom. And it gave them a certain satisfaction to feel that they possessed knowledge over and above that of their more humble neighbors.

But the man and woman in the street did hear the story of Janie's humiliation in varying forms and with varying emotions, though it is doubtful if anyone ever knew the exact particulars. Mr. Patton ignored the whole matter and put on his most sanctimonious expression when he appeared in public from then on and when his wife broached the subject to him with some heat and accused him of being "up to his old tricks" he scarcely dared say that Mrs. Spencer was a liar for fear his wife might make him face down that formidable lady. But he did tell Mrs. Patton that Mrs. Spencer was cruelly mistaken in her estimate of his character because he had simply gone into Mrs. Jarrett's bedroom to keep her from falling when she reached on a high shelf for the dress, lost her balance, and cried out in pain with an injured back. He devoutly wished that he had thought of the story earlier so that he might have stymied Mrs. Spencer with it at the time and come home with his wife's dress.

For Janie's part, she was too mortally embarrassed to tell the truth to anyone except Mrs. Sprague. Indeed, she

had no chance to tell it to anyone else because no other woman came to the house from then on with the exception of Mrs. Sprague who walked over one day from the store where she had come with her daughter to buy groceries.

"Janie, honey," she said, "no one blames you for what happened, at least no one with a lick of sense does. I know there's not a word of truth in any of the stories going 'round, except for the worst anybody could say about old Patton. That old skirt lifter ought to have his teeth kicked in, and if I was a man I'd do it. The thing is, he would never have laid a hand on you if Jason Jarrett had been around to reckon with. I wonder what Jason will do when he hears of it?"

"Well, so far he hasn't done a thing for the boys and me," Janie answered, "and I hope he doesn't do anything about this. It would only make matters worse and cause more gossip. Oh how I wish I could get away from here; away from this nasty little town where I feel like everybody is staring at me."

"I don't suppose there was ever a woman born that someone didn't talk about in one way or another," Mrs. Sprague said sadly. "Especially if she's as good looking as you are. No matter where you go, there will be gossips and there will always be men like Patton, too, but there might be better opportunities to make a living somewhere else."



I've been thinking of something, Janie. You're a single woman now. You could take a homestead because you're the head of a family. I'd stay with you at least part of the time, if you wanted me to. We could keep a few cows and some chickens and make a living that way. You could get someone to do your breaking for you and plant a crop and you know I'm still as strong as I ever was."

Mrs. Sprague waxed eloquent on the subject of her and Janie's living on a homestead and decided privately that she would approach Jason for the money necessary to start farming. In all decency he owed Janie something for making a wreck of her life and leaving her with two children to support.

"I hadn't thought of a farm, of taking up land," Janie acknowledged. "It is an idea, though. But I'd be afraid to stay alone out on a homestead with just the little boys."

"You ought to be thinking about getting yourself some land, though. About the only chance there is out here to make a decent living is through owning land and you've got the boys to take care of alone now, it looks like."

"I want to think it over a while before I make a decision," Janie said thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I can't rely on my judgment, I don't believe it's any good. Ten years ago I married Jason, which was a poor thing to have done,

though I couldn't know it at the time. Then I came up here to Vale which was another bad move, though I don't know where I could have gone and I don't see how I could have stayed at the ranch. I'm almost afraid to do anything for fear it will be wrong. Just give me a little time to think it over."

"Of course, Janie." Mrs. Sprague rose to go. "I'll have to get on over to the store now, but just remember you can count on me."

Janie was feeling desperate and it had cost her a lot to tell Mrs. Sprague that she wanted time to think over her proposition. The cupboard in the little house held only a very few supplies and her dinner that day would be pan cakes made with water and with a little sorghum molasses poured over them. There had been no sugar or coffee in the house for days and butter or milk were unknown luxuries. It hurt Janie to see her little boys eating the poor fare and to know that only hunger drove them to eat food so unlike that to which they were accustomed.

"Jason knew I couldn't make a living for myself and the boys and he thought I'd have to come crawling back to him," she thought, "well, I won't go back. I'll go out and dig snake root first, or herd cattle, or take in washing."

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Daddy Harl was worried. Neither Janie nor the children had been in the store all week and he was positive she didn't have enough groceries on hand to last for that long. From his window he could see across into her yard and he knew that she and the boys must be subsisting on what they could get from their garden patch. The old man hesitated about offering her groceries on account. He was sure she would never be able to pay for them, he couldn't afford to lose the money, and he felt that Jason should be supporting his family. Daddy, of course, had heard all the gossip that was going the rounds and although he had stoutly defended Janie's reputation, he knew that she was not getting any sewing to do.

"My God, there ain't a decenter woman in the state of Kansas," he said angrily to the crowd of men gathered in the store that evening. "Anybody that tries to run Janie down has got me to fight, man or woman. Old Patton would try to paw his grandmother, if she wasn't up on her toes and every one of you fellers knows it, too. What could Janie do; all alone there with two little children, and them not even home at the time?"

"You're right," Sid White said heatedly and rose from the nail keg he had been sitting on. "I used to go with Janie some before she was married and a nicer girl never lived. If the women in this neighborhood want to tear her



apart, there's not much I can do, but no man had better let me hear him say anything against her reputation."

"You fellers just keep your shirts on now a minute. Nobody here was sayin' anything against Janie; we was just repeatin' some of the things that have been said." The speaker was tall John Worth who lived north of Vale a few miles and whose wife was a pillar of the church and a tireless gossip.

"Mrs. Jarrett is the last woman in the country I'd accuse of layin' in the bushes. I remember when she used to work here in the store. She was always as nice as could be. You can tell by the way a woman looks out of her eyes whether she's good or bad. And Janie was the kind of woman you just naturally respected."

"Yes, she was," cut in middle-aged, high-voiced Billy Graves, getting to his feet and assuming a commanding position in the middle of the floor. "Janie was good and she still is and I refuse to believe anything else. She's been badly used by Jason Jarrett and he ought to be horsewhipped for what he's done to her. He had no right to marry her in the first place, and he's got no right to set her out now without a dime. Any time I ever worked down there, I couldn't have asked for anyone to treat me better than Mrs. Jarrett did."

Billy was a bachelor who owned a tiny two-room house

in Vale where he lived when he wasn't making an extra hand on the various farms and ranches nearby. He would sit and gossip with anyone who would listen to him, but his talk was seldom malicious, though frequently tiresome. He was considered honest and dependable and, though he was inconspicuous and mediocre, his opinion carried a certain weight in the community.

"I've got an idea," he went on in his thin voice, "let's take up a collection and help Janie out. I'll give a dollar and---"

"No you won't," put in Daddy Harl belligerently. "Nobody's going to take up any collection for Janie. She's my granddaughter and I'll take care of her myself. She wouldn't take charity no how and I wouldn't let her, if she would. She won't need it."

"Well, you're gettin' around a little late, if you ask me, old man," John Worth muttered in a low voice for the benefit of the man who sat nearest to him.

Daddy, if he heard the remark, chose to ignore it and went on pompously, "Yes sir, Janie's comin' over and stay with me. I'm goin' to ask her about it tomorrow. So that's settled." He began closing windows noisily and the loiterers knew this was a sign for them to go home. They wandered out on the porch into the summer darkness where they all agreed that it was a fine night and that the weather was certainly

good for the wheat.

Daddy heard the sound of their horses' hooves as they rode away down the street and asked of no one in particular,

"Now why in tarnation didn't I think of that before? Here I've had Charlie Stone keep the store while I went for supplies ever since Mrs. Laton died, or else I'd send him into town for goods and no telling when he'd come back nor what he'd buy. Now Janie and the boys can come over and she can tend the store while I go to Fort Hays for goods. It'll stop the gossip, too. Janie's got a man to perrect her now."

Actually Daddy's conscience had bothered him ever since Janie had moved to Vale. He felt in a way responsible for her marriage because he and Mrs. Naylor had encouraged Jason's rather half-hearted suit. And now here was Janie with two children on her hands and no husband to provide for them.

Another matter troubled him, too, and he wondered if Jason, who knew considerable about law and had a disconcerting habit of being right when any legal question arose, had thought of it. Daddy Harl knew that Janie was Mrs. Naylor's legal heir and that, according to Kansas law, half the store had belonged to Mrs. Naylor. Therefore, when she died her share of the business became half his and the other half Janie's. That made one-fourth of the store Janie's property. He had never had any appraisal made of Mrs. Naylor's estate,



had taken no legal steps whatever. He had simply gone on as though the whole property were his and Janie had no interest.

He knew that, if she wanted, Janie could make him pay her for half of her grandmother's interest. The thought was annoying and he felt that he should ask her to come over and live with him before someone remembered the legal technicalities involved.

A year after Mrs. Naylor's death Daddy had again written to a matrimonial bureau for a wife and Mrs. Laton had come out to Kansas and married him. The diabetic Mrs. Laton had lived less than two years.

"Why I hardly got to know the woman," he told Doc Hale, "She was sick when she come out here and if I'd known it I wouldn't have married her. All she done was cost me doctor bills and hardly done a lick of work all the while she lived. I don't think I'm gonna get married again. The next woman might have somethin' ketchin'! She was never the manager Mrs. Naylor was, either. She couldn't even count change, just stand there with the money in her hand and let people pick out what they wanted to. You know how that worked out. And she wasn't any housekeeper, not like Mrs. Naylor was."

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When Jason realized that Janie, the boys, and Mrs. Sprague were indeed gone, his rage knew no bounds. He was already angered by his encounter with Huldy, he was hungry and tired and he was totally unprepared to enter an empty house. That Janie would actually leave him was the last idea to enter his head. Here he was prepared to make his peace, to do anything under the sun he could to rid himself of Huldy, and get back into Janie's good graces, to make a clean breast of everything--or nearly everything--and start life anew, and he had been, as he thought, deserted.

"She'll never get a cent out of me unless she comes back here," he stated emphatically to the four walls of his house, "I'll not support any woman that won't live with me and I told her so last night. I don't suppose I could have expected her to actually live with me, but she could have stayed here until this thing was settled and I had got rid of old Huldy. Her going away like this shows she had no faith in me. She didn't give me a chance to explain things to her, to tell her how I come to marry Huldy and why I left her. Well, she can sit in Vale, or wherever she went to, till she mosses over and I won't ask her to come back. Never. But I'll keep a watch on her and if she doesn't take proper care of my boys, I'm going after them and bring them home."

When Jason learned that Janie had indeed gone to Vale,

he grinned sardonically and told Joe,

"Well, she likes the place better than I do, and if she can make a living there, she'll do better than anybody else has been able to, except old Harl. The cheese factory they built was a failure--the idea of building a cheese factory when there wasn't a dairy cow in four hundred miles--the grist mill only runs when there's been a rain that wasn't big enough to wash out the dam, and the railroad they surveyed through the place will never be built. Everything planned for that town just dies in the shell, it looks like. And no wonder, it's a judgment on the people there for stealing my land the way they did."

The house he had loved so well seemed like a tomb to Jason now and he longed to go away from the Circle C, if only for a while. But he dared not leave the place for fear Huldry would make good her threat and move into the house. Sometimes he almost wished she would, so that he might have the pleasure of throwing her out, and again he shrank from any contact with the woman.

"My God, if I had only never seen her," he groaned, "if I could have known what I do now, I would have run the first time I ever laid eyes on her. But it's too late for that now and I don't know what to do till she makes a move. But I can wait as long as she can, and longer, because from the looks of things, she's about out of money and when she is,



then she'll talk turkey. Then we'll come to an understanding. And then I'll be in a position to deal with Miss Janie, too. She's going to sit up and take notice, because I'm going to have those boys, one way or another."

Fearing that Huldý would indeed move into the house during his absence, Jason left Joe in charge of the place one day while he made a trip to Fort Hays where he legally adopted Dick and Dave.

"Just in case any one should try to come in for a part of my property if I happened to die suddenly," he told the probate judge and proceeded to make a will leaving the ranch to the twins. The will was doubtless illegal, since he did not name a wife, but he felt better as he rode home the next day. At least the boys were legally his and nothing that happened could change that.

During this time, Huldý had tried frequently to start an interview with Jason and the boy, too, had attempted to be friendly, but Jason had brushed them both off and refused to hold any intercourse whatever with either. As he had guessed, Huldý was short of money and was becoming anxious as to what Jason intended doing about a settlement with her. She had given up hope that he might acknowledge her as his wife and she realized that since Janie had gone away he was in no hurry to come to terms with her. She began to suspect that he planned to out-wait her, to sit tight without

granting her any concessions in the belief that she would leave the country without getting anything from him or that he could buy her off for next to nothing and be well rid of her.

The March wind was blowing gustily one morning some three weeks after her arrival at the Circle C when Huldry awoke to find her horses gone.

"I'll get breakfast first and then we'll go after them," she told the boy, "you make a fire and I'll fix something quick. I oughtn't to have ever picketed them across the river, but the grass on this side is about gone and I thought they'd be all right over there. I can't see how they could have pulled loose from the pins the way they did. That damned Jason probably let them loose just to devil me. He's been awful mild about my stayin' here, come to think of it. It's a wonder he didn't cause me trouble before now. Well, we can track them down, if we start right away and don't let them get too far ahead of us."

She continued to talk all the while she prepared the meal and all the time she and the boy were eating it. Huldry did a lot of talking; she even talked to herself and she kept up a running conversation as they trailed the horses nearly three miles down the river where they found them cropping grass in a sheltered space near the stream.

"Their halters are even gone and what's become of

their picket ropes?" she inquired of the boy who made no answer whatever. "There's somethin' rotten in Denmark all right. I'll bet Jason Cummins turned these horses loose. I don't know why, but I'm gonna find out. He's gonna pay for this," and she proceeded to make threats all the way back to the spring where she had left her wagon.

The three miles back seemed twice as far because both Huldy and the boy were tired and were becoming more hungry with each step. They had intended to ride on the return trip, but in her haste Huldy had forgotten to bring the bridles and since the halters were gone, she and the boy were forced to walk. The boy was silent for the most part and finally Huldy turned to him and said,

"Well, Oral, I always told you I would hunt up your pa and take you to him. Guess you don't remember him, do you?"

"Reckon I don't, Maw. I wasn't more than four years old when he drowned, was I?"

"About four, I guess. He didn't exactly drown, Oral. I thought he had for a while and I collected his insurance, but I found out later that he wasn't dead so I started looking for him and I found him out here on this ranch. What do you think of this place anyway? Would you like to live here?"

"Naw, I wouldn't. It's lonesome here. No boys my



age around and Paw won't even speak to me. Why won't he?"

"Well, your father's a busy man and he was mad at me when he left Illinois and it looks like he still is, too, but---"

"Well, what's he mad about? What's he mad at me for? I never done anything to him. Let's go back home where we know people and where it ain't so lonesome."

"I don't think we've got enough money to go back home, Oral. I thought I'd get some money from your father, but things ain't turning out the way I thought they would. I thought he'd be glad to pay me to leave if I threatened him some, but he ain't comin' through like I thought he would. I'm sorry now I went up to the house that day and talked the way I done to that Janie woman. It woulda been better for us if she hadn't gone away. Now she's left it looks like Jason don't care whether we stay or not. I think he's just actin' that way to get the upper hand of me and make me leave on his terms. Well, he'll find out about that, too. I can wait as long as he can."

"When we started out here, you said we was comin' out and live with Paw, didn't you?" Oral wanted to know.

"I reckon I did say that," Huldry told him, "but it's been so long since Jason left me that he don't want to live with me any more, it looks like."

"You said you was gonna move into that house, too."

Well, why don't you? I'm tired livin' in the wagon and sleepin' on the ground and eatin' what eggs I can sneak out of the barn and a chicken now and then when I can ketch one without bein' seen. We're out of flour and ain't had any bread in a week. Meat and eggs ain't much good without some bread."

"Well, I know, Oral, we're not livin' like I thought we would when we started out here, but your pa has changed from what he was years ago. I used to do the bossin' till he went away to the war, but when he come back he was different and he's still different now from what he was then. But I think he's gettin' restless. I think he wants us to leave and I believe he'll be ready to pay me off pretty soon."

"Well, the sooner we leave here the better it'll be. The fellows that work here ain't friendly and Paw ain't and I'm lonesome," Oral answered and they walked the rest of the way in silence.

It was well past noon when Oral and Huldý arrived at the ford across from the spring, waded the river, and walked up the slope toward their camping place. They were very nearly to the spot that had been their home for practically three weeks when Huldý gave a piercing shriek and started raving and ranting.

"The low-lifed bastard," she screamed in choked accents, "he's burnt up everything I owned! Everything! What little

money I had, if he didn't steal it first, our clothes, and they was clean, too; my marriage certificate, all the evidence I had against him. Everything!"

Her words were indeed correct. All that remained of the wagon was a smoking mass of charred wood and rubbish with a few twisted pieces of iron sticking out--the tires, the linchpins, the brake and end gate rods.

"He turned the horses loose last night so he could get me away from here long enough to do this," Huldry told the boy, "he knowed I'd be excited when I found them gone and that I'd go right after them and then he could do this to me. Well, he's gonna pay for it, if there's any way to make him. I'm goin' right up there now," and she started for the house.

Jason and Tommy had shared a hearty meal in the bunk-house and Jason had just gone over to his own sitting room to read for a while when he saw Huldry and the boy returning with the horses. Jason was highly amused and thoroughly delighted with the turn the morning's events had taken. He had let Huldry's horses loose and not altogether with the intention of annoying her. The horses had been picketed in the same spot for so long that the grass was eaten away and Jason knew that the next Spring that particular patch of ground would be weed covered. It bothered him because it wasn't good management and he knew the horses needed more to



eat, too. He knew it was pure laziness on the part of the boy that the horses were not moved farther from the camp site. Oral just didn't want to lead the horses any distance to water. Jason felt that Huldý should have taken better care of the worn-out beasts so he planned to turn them loose of nights so they could get more to eat, and incidentally annoy Huldý. He didn't sleep so well these nights anyway and it was mostly because of her.

The burning of the wagon was pure accident--the result of carelessness. Neither Huldý nor the boy had taken time to put out the breakfast fire and it had spread to the nearby grass that had been trampled and killed around the wagon, and then to the wagon itself. When Jason saw the fire from the stable, the wagon was half consumed, the contents were blazing merrily, and the canvas cover was snapping and blowing in the wind.

"Let the damned thing go," Jason told Tommy who had sauntered over from the bunkhouse, "I didn't set it afire and I won't put it out. That cussed woman's got to leave here before she burns the whole place down. The idea of leaving a fire in a wind like this. The lazy, careless rip."

Tommy didn't answer. He had small use for Huldý. Besides being a nuisance herself, her dog was always in the henhouse sucking the eggs. Jason had told him on no account to give or sell Huldý any supplies, but whenever Jason left

the place there was Huldý at his kitchen door trying to wheedle him out of food. His stock answer was always,

"These ain't my vittles, ma'am, they're Jason's. You buy them from him. I'm not allowed to sell anything on this ranch; that's the boss's job. See him about it." And though Huldý berated him soundly and assured him that when she became mistress of the ranch she would even her score with him, he remained obdurate.

Now he saw no reason why he should try to save the wagon. When that was gone perhaps the woman would go away and life at the ranch would resume its normal course. He even dared to hope that Janie and the twins might come back and that again there would be laughter and the shout of childish voices about the place. Tommy loved Janie and the boys; they had been kind to him. He even loved Jason. They were all the family he had, and if anything should happen that he would have to leave the ranch, he would be indeed bereft. Though the whole atmosphere of the place now bore a funereal air, it was home and Tommy hoped to live and die there.

Jason had foreseen that Huldý would come up to the house and he hoped that at last they might have a show-down. He was in high good humor and intended to stay that way.

"That woman always brings out the worst in me," he told himself wryly, "but today I'm going to hold my temper

or bust in the effort. I won't get mad and I'll let her do the talking. She wants money and I'll beat her down to the smallest amount it'll take to get rid of her."

He had decided long ago that if he could help it, Huldy should never get inside the house, so today he went out on the wide front porch and seated himself in the only chair. He was dressed warmly and figured that Huldy, in thinner clothing, would undoubtedly be willing to make terms before he would.

"Good morning, Mrs. Cummins," he began in mock sympathy when Huldy had reached the steps, "I see you've had some bad luck this morning."

"Bad luck!" Huldy strangled, "bad luck, you low-lifed hell devil, you burnt my wagon and everything in it. You're going to pay for this you---"

"Now just a minute," Jason interposed evenly, "Tommy was here all morning and he knows I never went near your broken-down vehicle. You left a camp fire burning, remember; it was a careless trick and it cost you your wagon and whatever you had in it. But you were always playing with fire, if I remember correctly."

Jason's words held the ring of truth and Huldy was nonplussed. She had been sure that he had set fire to her only remaining earthly possessions.

"Well, I notice you didn't make any effort to put it



out. You didn't save a thing."

"Why should I? You're footloose now, you can be leaving any time you please."

"Yes, I can be leaving any time. You turned my horses loose, too, last night so I'd have to run them down. Just why was that?"

"The horses are on my land without my consent. You've picketed them in the same place so long the grass is killed out. There'll be a weed patch down there next spring, and besides the horses needed more to eat. Why haven't you seen that? Are you people too lazy to lead a couple of horses a little way to water?"

"You think you've got me where you want me, Jason Cummins, but I'm not through with you yet. Here this boy and me stands with just the clothes on our backs and empty bellies and you don't even ask us in the house."

"No, I have no intention of asking you in this house. All I want is for you to get out of here as I told you to do a month ago."

"If you think I'm going without a settlement, you've got the wrong bear by the tail, let me tell you."

"Settlement? What do you mean settlement?"

"I mean that I took every bit of the risk of collectin' your insurance money; that I even met you in St. Louis and give you six thousand dollars of it in gold. And when I

wanted to go with you, you said it was too risky so soon after I'd got the money, and that as soon as you got settled out West you'd send for me. I oughta knowed you wouldn't do it. You always was a tarnation liar."

"As I've told you before, I don't know anything about that. What you did after I left is immaterial to what's happening now. I don't know anything whatever about how you defrauded the insurance company. But if you want to take it up with them, I'll be glad to talk it over with them any time."

"So you're threatenin' me; and you deny that I ever give you part of the money."

"Can you prove that I got any of it?"

"No, I don't suppose I could actually prove that you did," the admission came slowly from Huldý.

"Then don't go around making the loose statements you have been. You might have to prove some of them and I don't believe you could--now. But let's get down to business. How much blackmail are you demanding?"

"So I'm a blackmailer, am I? Let's hear first what you've got to offer."

"What I want to know is how much you'll take to get a divorce and get out of the country and stay out."

"And I want to know how much you'll pay."

"You name your price; and just remember that I can

get a divorce any time I want one, that I have plenty of evidence against you and that I'll not hesitate to use it."

"You're a low-lifed blackguard, Jason Cummins, if there ever was one, to bring that up after all these years."

"My good woman, I don't intend to let time or distance make any difference. I'm going to get rid of you once and for all, and the sooner the better. Luckily, the government has records as to where I was and what I was doing all through the war. Nothing will be hard to prove."

"Why can't we forget everything that's past, Jason, and start over again?" Huldry pleaded on a new note.

Jason sprang to his feet. "No, by God," he shouted, "you're getting out of here. Name your price."

"It's not fair," Huldry proceeded belligerently, "here you've done everything, everything sinful you could do from defraudin' an insurance company to committin' adultery and changin' your name, and you've got rich at it while I---"

Jason interrupted. "If I was in your place, I wouldn't bring up anything about adultery, Mrs. Cummins. It sounds a little funny, coming from you. Maybe you think I've forgotten how I came home, after more than two years in the army, to find you with that boy just learning to sit up by himself. You know, I never did ask you about all that. We could thresh it out now. I've got plenty of time."

"Yes, you've got plenty of time. Here me and this



boy stands without a roof over our heads, or a mouthful of vittles to eat, and you don't so much as offer us a meal."

"Your condition is your own fault," Jason told her pleasantly. "It wouldn't matter how much money or property you got hold of, you wouldn't know enough to take care of it. When we come to a settlement, and I hand over to you my hard-earned money, you won't have it a year. But don't come back for more. What you get now will be all you'll ever get out of me."

"You're in the saddle making all the rules, Jason, even though you're just as dishonest as I've ever been. Well, give me ten thousand dollars and I'll leave."

"Not ten thousand," Jason told her bluntly. "Six. And that's away too much."

"I could get more than that out of you, if I took it to law."

"Take it to law, if that's what you want to do. I doubt that you could prove we were ever married, without going back to Illinois, and I don't think you'll want to start anything there, even if you had a way to go."

Huldy was tired, cold, hungry. She saw Jason had no intention of relenting toward her and she knew that actually there was no reason why he should. The six thousand dollars he had offered her seemed like a great deal of money when she considered how easy she was getting it.

"I'll take what you've offered," she said slowly, "but how's the boy and me to get away from here?"

"I'll see that you get away from here," Jason told her promptly, "come on out to the bunkhouse and Tommy can fix you something to eat. I'll get a wagon ready and you can leave this afternoon."

Jason led the way to the bunkhouse. "Get these people their dinner," he told Tommy. "They're leaving just as soon as they can eat."

Tommy stirred up the fire, made fresh coffee, fried thick slices of salted side pork, broke fresh eggs in the grease and then thickened it with flour to make milk gravy. As he cut slices from one of his big, round loaves of bread; he thought happily that now the woman was leaving and Jason would surely be in a better humor from now on. He even brought out a raisin pie and cut generous wedges for Huldy and the boy.

Joe rode in from the range and sat down for coffee and a slice of pie. He sat at the table and talked agreeably while Tommy explained that their unwelcome guests were leaving shortly. Joe soon left and hunted up Jason to be sure that the good news was true. All of the men on the ranch had felt that, even though Huldy did have a case against Jason, Janie had not been treated fairly and they wanted more than anything else to see Jason get his tangled marital

affairs straightened out so that Janie and the twins could come back home. Huldy had antagonized all of them by asking prying questions about how many acres of land Jason owned, how many cattle and horses there were on the place, whether or not Jason was in debt, how he and Janie got along, what the house looked like inside, and where they thought Jason had got the money to accumulate so much property.

"Get a tent down from the hay loft," Jason told Joe when he saw him coming, "she can use it as a sheet for the wagon till she gets one in Fort Hays. Let's get this ready for her as soon as we can. Will you go down and get her horses while I run a wagon out from under the shed? Then come into the bunkhouse. I want you and Tommy to hear the agreement I'm going to make with her."

When the wagon was ready, Joe and Jason returned to the bunkhouse where Huldy and the boy were finishing their meal. Jason seated himself at the table when it had been cleared and motioned to Joe and Tommy to draw up chairs.

"All right ma'am," Jason said to Huldy, "for the sum of six thousand dollars you agree to get a divorce in Fort Hays, you then agree to leave the state of Kansas and never enter it again. You also agree that you have no further claim upon me and that you will never again ask me for money or any other form of settlement."

"Yes," Huldy assented rather reluctantly. She had a



full stomach now and felt slightly belligerent. "Yes, I suppose so, but what about this boy? You ought to do something for him."

"Just let that boy try anything with me, and he'll find out who he is fast enough," Jason countered quickly and sat up closer to the table. "Do you want to settle, or not?"

"I'll settle," Huldy grunted and Jason drew his check-book from his pocket.

In a firm hand he wrote out the check for six thousand dollars, handed it to Huldy and rose from the table. The money had been saved to buy better bred black Angus cattle and Jason parted from it with exceeding reluctance. It hurt him to think that the money he had accumulated to improve the stock for the twins was going to a woman like Huldy who would let it run carelessly through her fingers. But he felt that almost any cost was justified in order to rid himself of her and he devoutly hoped that she would keep her part of the bargain.

Huldy's horses were at last hitched to the wagon and she turned them southwest along the trail that led toward Fort Hays. Jason heaved a sigh of relief when the wagon dipped into the bottom land along the river and was lost to sight among the trees.

"This is March," he thought restlessly, "court's setting

now. If she brings an action for divorce as soon as she gets to town, the case could be tried at the June session. In six months after that Janie and I can be married again. That'll be December. By this time next year, it can all be forgotten and things can go on as though the damned woman had never been here. It doesn't seem possible this is the same place. It's a vault if I ever saw one. Well, tomorrow I'm going up and have a talk with Janie."

The day after Huldys departure, Jason rode slowly into Vale. It hurt his pride severely to go into the little town. He felt that everyone in the place was eyeing him and wondering what his purpose was for coming to Vale for the first time since Janie had moved there. Too, a feeling of guilt assailed him at having neglected Janie and the little boys.

As he rode up to the little house under the cottonwoods, he saw that it was deserted and that there was no sign of life about the place. For a moment fear gripped him as he thought that Janie might have taken the boys and gone back to Ohio. He felt remorse, too, for his callous treatment of a gentle woman who had dedicated ten years of her life to his happiness.

"If she's gone for good, I'll never be able to stand it," he told himself. "Why was I such a bull-headed fool as to take it out on her because she left me?"

He turned his horse to ride away and spied Dave playing in the yard back of the store. The twins were playing hide-and-seek and Dick was hidden behind the chicken house. Dave came running and shouting to his father and Dick soon followed. The boys were overjoyed to see Jason who knelt on the ground with an arm about each of them. Their eager questions and shouts of happiness brought Janie to the back door where she stood and watched Jason with his children.

Jason seemed to feel her gaze because he looked up and saw her watching him with the boys. Her face was white and strained and he realized that she thought he had come to take the boys away.

"I heard you had adopted them," Janie said in a tight voice when he walked toward her.

"That was for their protection in case anything happens to me before I can get rid of that woman."

"So you do plan to get rid of her."

"I have gotten rid of her. She left yesterday for Fort Hays to get a divorce and then she's supposed to leave the country for good. I paid her cash for leaving. I felt it was worth it. When her divorce decree becomes final, you and I can re-marry."

"I'm not sure I want to be married to a man who has treated me as you have. If I can bring up my children without help from you, I'm going to do it Jason."



"I know I've been a dog, Janie, and I'm sorry. Won't you let me spend the rest of my life making it up to you? You and the boys are all I've got in the world, you know."

Janie couldn't keep her heart from softening toward him. She moved aside so that he could enter the door and told the boys to play outside for a while. Jason made no move to touch her as he came into the room and Janie thanked him silently for that. There had always been a certain delicacy of feeling between them and he knew instinctively that his case would not be helped if he tried to place a hand upon her.

Daddy Harl had gone to Fort Hays for supplies and Janie could watch for customers from the kitchen. The stage came every other day with mail and passengers, but this was not the day for it. The weather was warm and sunny, just right for farmers to be working their land so there would not be many customers coming in the store. Janie and Jason could talk without interruption. Jason seated himself near the table and looked around.

"I can't remember ever being in this room before," he mused.

"I don't think you ever were," Janie said a little crossly, "as I remember, you never did ask to go any place with me or come to see me as I thought you should."

"I never intended to go with anybody or marry anyone,"

Jason told her. "If I hadn't seen you in Fort Hays when I did, I would never have married you. You know I did because I couldn't stand by and see you marry Glen Spencer."

"And would that have been so bad?"

"It could have been. Do you think Edith Kellog is happy? The Spencers have got away with most of the money she had and the sheriff is right behind them again, I hear."

"Money isn't everything," Janie was a little sharp in her triteness.

"You'll find that it very nearly is, my dear. It will get you into places you could never have gotten into without it and out of places you'd have to stay in for life, if you didn't have it. Life can be pretty squalid without any money at all. But about the Spencers. Would you want to live around that old lady the rest of her life, the way Edith has to?"

From the tone of his voice, Janie knew Jason had not heard of the gossip Mrs. Spencer had spread about the incident with Mr. Patton.

"There's no use going into all that at this late date," she told him, "but I've always wondered why you left your-- left Huldy and came out here to live."

"The reason is simple enough. I came home after two years in the Civil War, without any furlough mind you, to find a six-months-old baby in the cradle."

"So the boy isn't yours?"

"The boy is not mine. And by the way, I made a will and mentioned that fact."

"You could have gotten a divorce. You didn't have to just get up and leave."

"I could have and I should have. I know that well enough now. But I didn't and time went on. I intended to spend my life alone, though I wanted to live like other men, certainly."

"How did you ever happen to marry her in the first place?" Janie was constrained to ask. "I never have been able to imagine the two of you living together. I can't see you courting a woman like Huldy."

"I suppose you're entitled to an explanation," Jason said slowly. He was silent for a time, then went on, "I didn't court her in the way you're thinking of. When I landed in Illinois, the part where the Taylors lived, I went to work for Huldy's father. He owned a fair-sized farm, though the buildings were run down and the land, too, because the old man was about half-dead with consumption and hadn't been able to farm properly for years. Huldy was nearly thirty, her mother was dead and she kept house for her father. All of her brothers and sisters lived at some distance from home and were not able to help old Taylor."

"If she was thirty, she must have been older than you



were."

"Yes, she was older. I stayed there and worked a year. It wasn't a bad place to work, the old man paid fair wages and he was a good manager when he had someone to farm properly. About the time that I planned to move on--I had always wanted to come west and I had saved my wages for that purpose, Huldry said that she was in a family way and that I would have to marry her."

"Well---," Janie had flushed deeply and could scarcely find words to express herself.

"It was perfectly possible, of course," Jason continued, "the woman's got no morals, and we'd been playing around."

"It doesn't sound as though you had any morals either," Janie blurted.

"Maybe not. I certainly didn't want to marry her, but I didn't feel like I could go away and leave her either. I was younger then and a lot less experienced than I am today. I finally married her against my wishes and my better judgment."

"What became of that child," Janie wanted to know.

"There wasn't one. She had lied to me. She wanted to be married and that was the way she hooked me. About the time I found out how I had been fooled, the war had started and I joined the army. After her father died, she ran the

place alone and you should have seen what it looked like when I got back. What little money she had made, she had evidently squandered one way or another. The whole farm was run down, the taxes hadn't been paid, the mortgage was about to be foreclosed, things couldn't have been worse."

"But she couldn't have done much better alone. A woman can't run a farm by herself very well," Janie interposed.

"She wasn't exactly alone. She had a second cousin that lived close by and he had been helping her out one way and another." Jason's tone was significant.

"Was the boy his?"

"I suppose so. I never asked her. It didn't matter. When I saw how things were, I knew I would never stay; that now I was going west and that's just what I did."

Janie would have liked to ask about Huldys story regarding the insurance money, but she hesitated to do this. A certain regard for the man's feelings kept her from prying further into his affairs. Jason sensed that she would like to know this, but he had made up his mind that he would never admit to anyone that he had returned for part of the money Huldys had collected. He knew there was no possible way she or anyone else could prove that he had come back and that she had divided with him. He had no compunction in telling Huldys that he would send for her and never having

done so because he felt that he owed her nothing, but he was deeply ashamed that he had helped to defraud the insurance company and he was determined that wild horses would never be able to drag the truth from him.

Just then the door slammed noisily and Janie rose and entered the store. It was John Worth who had come in hurriedly for a pound of three penny nails. Janie weighed out the nails carefully and returned to the kitchen. Jason was standing by the door watching the twins with a far-away look in his eyes.

"I'm leaving now Janie," he told her, "if you want to see me, you can always drop me a letter. I'm sorry for the way I've acted and I want you and the boys to come back as soon as possible."

"I told you before, Jason, that I'm not making any plans to go back. Daddy Harl needs me here, he's been good to me and the boys, and I had just as soon stay."

"He ought to be good to you. Your grandmother has been dead about ten years and in all that time he's never made any accounting of her estate."

"Her estate? Why what do you mean?" Janie questioned.

"I mean that when he married your grandmother, half of his property became hers. When she died half of her estate became yours. Your mother was her only child and you were her only heir. Didn't she have some money when she



came out here to marry old Harl?"

"Well, yes, she did have. It was what grandfather had left her. I don't know just how much, though."

"The old man's stock of goods was a lot larger right after that. She not only brought him money, she made him money. She was good at business. Old lady Laton couldn't even count change, but nobody got ahead of Mrs. Naylor."

"Why didn't you ever mention this before? Have you always known it?"

"Of course I have. But you didn't need anything from him. There wasn't any use to make him trouble about it. But if you're going to stay here a while, you'd just as well know where you stand, and if he gets chesty, just ask him for an accounting. And he'd better treat my boys right, or I'm coming after them."

The screen door slammed behind Jason as he walked out into the back yard. He talked a while with the boys and then, mounting Patch, rode back down the sandy street to where it joined the trail that led back to the ranch.

"So she thinks she'll never come back to me," he thought morosely. "I wonder how long it'll take for her to come to her senses?"

\* \* \*

Huldy crossed the river and drove up the long, winding

hill ahead. Soon she was on the flat land beyond with the horses heads turned toward Fort Hays.

"Well, Oral," she told the boy on the seat beside her, "we've got that settled. I've got six thousand dollars now to do with as I please, but I haven't made up my mind yet what to do with it. For one thing, I want some better horses. These travel too slow and they don't look very good alongside this here new wagon."

"Pa said these horses'd be all right, if you'd feed 'em better," the boy reminded her.

"Well, I may sell the whole outfit and go back home by train. I haven't made up my mind yet, but we're going to enjoy ourselves while we're in Fort Hays, I can tell you. We're going to fill our bellies with the best vittels we can find and sleep on beds with springs for a change."

Oral agreed that he, too, would enjoy good food and a comfortable bed and the two rode on together.

Finally Huldý remarked, "It's later than I thought it would be. Just look at that sun. We'll never make it to Fort Hays today unless we drive after dark. We should've waited till tomorrow to start out, but Jason couldn't wait to get rid of us. Dam' him any how for the way he's treated me. We'll have to find a place to camp for the night. The next crick we cross that's got some trees on it and some water will have to be the place."

They rode on until they came to the North Fork of Big Creek. By this time the sun was down and Huldry had begun to fear that they would have to make a dry camp some place on the prairie. They had gotten a camp fire going and Huldry had started a meal when another wagon crossed the creek from the south and made toward their camp site.

"Hello there," a man's voice spoke from the gathering gloom, "mind if I draw up alongside and camp?"

Hudly was not exactly happy at the prospect and asked guardedly, "Who are you? How many of you are there?"

"There's just me," the man answered. "I'll be glad to pay you for a meal of your cooking. Is it all right with you, mister?" The question was directed at Oral.

Oral was not quick enough to perceive that in the dusk of evening the man had thought he was grown, perhaps Huldry's husband, and he answered,

"Sure, drive right up, we'll be glad to have you. Ma's gettin' supper ready now." The boy was happy to have company; he was always afraid at night.

Huldry was somewhat disturbed at having a stranger camp so near her and Oral. She would have been better pleased if he had camped at least on the other bank of the creek. But she sliced more meat from the side of pork Jason had given her, fried a few more eggs than she would otherwise have needed and, when the meal was ready asked the



stranger to sit up with her and Oral.

The stranger sat down and smilingly introduced himself. "I'm Aaron Arnold," he told Huldý and the boy. "I live near Vale. Where is it you folks are from?"

Huldý hesitated an instant and then answered, "We're from the neighborhood of Vale, too. We just left out there this afternoon. I'm Mrs. Cummins and this is my son Oral."

"Mrs. Cummins, I'm glad to know you. You're not by any chance the lady that's been camping at the Jarrett Ranch, are you?"

"Yes, I am," Huldý stated belligerently. "Jason Cummins give me a dirty deal, too, if anybody ever did. When he left me and this child back in Illinois, he never intended to send for us and now that I've tracked him down he pays me six thousand dollars and tells me to get out."

"You mean you got six thousand dollars out of Jarrett?" Arnold was on the scent immediately. "You've got six thousand dollars with you?"

"It's just a check," Oral explained. "We ain't got a cent till we cash it."

"So you made a settlement with Jarrett," Mr. Arnold mused. "And what does he get out of all this?"

"I'm supposed to go into Fort Hays and sue him for divorce and then clear out so he can marry the pretty little woman he's been livin' with," Huldý answered bitterly.

"Mrs. Cummins, you've been wronged, sadly wronged, it seems to me," Arnold told her gravely. "I believe I'd consider every move I made carefully, if I was in your place."

Huldy sat silently for a while and Arnold continued, "This is the best meal I've ate since my wife died a year ago. You are sure a fine cook, Mrs. Cummins, a fine cook."

No one had ever told Huldy that she was even a passable cook before now and Mr. Arnold's praise made her self-conscious. She scarcely knew how to answer, so she kept silent. Arnold, thinking that perhaps he had laid it on a little thick, said no more until after the meal was ended when he asked Oral to help him hobble his horses. After brief goodnights, the travelers settled down until morning.

In the light of day, Huldy could see that Aaron Arnold was a handsome and, she thought, a charming man. He was tall, well built, urbane, with wide-spaced, deep blue eyes in a smiling, sensual face. While the three of them were eating breakfast, he told Huldy,

"It seems to me, ma'am, that you are foolish to leave this country, that you ought to invest your money here in Kansas. We need fine folks like you and your son to help build up the state. You'd not only be helping out the country, but yourselves. Why don't you get some land here and settle down?"

Huldy was flattered. It had been a long time since

anyone had shown so much interest in her welfare and she told him,

"Well, I know there's still a lot of land around here for homesteaders and I have thought of taking up some of it."

"Oh no, ma'am, not a homestead. Not for you. The boy is young and I can see that you're not used to such rough work as building fence and breaking prairie. What I mean is an improved place somewhere along the river where you would always be sure of plenty of water and fuel. The fishing's good, too, on the Saline. All those things mean something in a new country, you know."

"But where would I find such a place?" Huldý wanted to know.

"There's not many for sale, but I could find one for you," Arnold went on. "In fact, I own such a place. I'm not anxious to part with it, but I will if I can get my price. I bought it as an investment a few years ago, but it makes more land than I can handle by myself now that my two oldest boys have left home. They wanted to get out and farm for themselves; you know how young fellows are."

Arnold didn't bother to explain that the two boys in question had been forced to leave home because of the ill treatment he had given them.

Huldý hardly knew what to tell Arnold. She didn't like to be forced into a decision so soon. Her mind had



been set on going to Fort Hays, getting her check cashed, spending some of the money for good food and clothing, sleeping on a decent bed as a change from months of traveling and living in a covered wagon. Further than this she had not thought. She wavered and Arnold saw his chance.

"There's no question, Mrs. Cummins, but what you ought to invest your money immediately. Anyone will tell you that if you don't have a place to put your money it will get away from you a little at a time and within a year you won't have anything to show for it."

"But I promised Jason I would get a divorce and leave here," she said.

"Was there anything in writing to that effect?"

"No, not in writing, but two of the men at the ranch were witnesses."

"The agreement wasn't worth a damn and Jarrett knows it. It's against the law anyway for two people to make an agreement about getting a divorce. You listen to me, buy the farm I'm telling you about, put your money into land and improvements that will make you a return on your investment. This place I'm telling you about has got good buildings on it, a fine well, lots of trees; it's well watered, it has rich farm land, everything. You couldn't ask for a better place."

Huldy's spirits rose at the thought that Mr. Arnold

was so interested in her welfare. The man was obviously falling in love with her. He had a way of following her movements with his eyes in what she felt sure was admiration.

"How much do you want for this place? she asked him when there came a lull in his discourse.

Aaron Arnold was no piker when it came to matters concerning money. "Six thousand dollars," he answered promptly without batting an eye.

Huldy hated to hurt the feelings of such a fine man as Mr. Arnold appeared to be, but she knew she would need some cash to put in a crop, to buy supplies and machinery. She also sensed vaguely that Mr. Arnold's interest in her as a woman was likely to wane when the money was no longer hers. And she was fast becoming infatuated with the man.

"No, I couldn't pay that much," she answered slowly, "I have to keep some cash on hand. I don't want to part with all of my money. The boy and me have to have some new clothes and a lot of other stuff. My wagon burnt up yesterday," and she told him about the fire.

Mr. Arnold was properly sympathetic. "Jarrett must have set your wagon on fire to destroy any evidence you had against him," he reasoned. "And then he paid you a measly six thousand dollars to leave. It just goes to show how low down a man like him can be, Mrs. Cummins. This is proof positive you hadn't ought to pay any attention to that

agreement you made with him."

"That's what I've decided," Huldy agreed, "and as soon as I make up my mind what to do about the land, I'll let you know."

Arnold had no intention whatever of letting Huldy make up her own mind. "I'll tell you what, Mrs. Cummins," he told her, "I've just remembered some business I forgot to attend to while I was in Fort Hays. I'll go back there with you and we can make a bargain about the land on the way in."

Arnold was a man of action. He went immediately to harness his horses and hitch them to the wagon, he helped Oral with his dreary old nags, and soon the two outfits were ready to set out for the fort.

"Here, Mrs. Cummins, you ride with me so we can talk business," Arnold insisted as he stood aside and assumed the stance of a man about to help a woman into a wagon.

Huldy couldn't remember ever having rated so much masculine attention in her life. She bridled and giggled like a bashful adolescent till Mr. Arnold was forced to turn his head aside and grin.

By the time they reached Fort Hays, the couple were calling each other by their first names and Huldy was so elated with her new-found friend and the idea of owning the fine farm that he had described to her that she entirely



forgot about the divorce proceedings she was supposed to start.

"We'll go to the bank right away," Arnold told Huldy when they reached town. "You deposit your check except for a hundred or so you'll need to buy groceries and other goods you'll want. Then you'd better get a place to spend the night and in the morning we'll get the deed fixed up for the farm."

When they left the bank he escorted Huldy to the hotel, saw that she and the boy had comfortable rooms for the night, ate supper with them, and then entertained them all evening in the hotel parlor until bedtime. Not for anything in the world would Arnold have allowed anyone to touch a penny of Huldy's money.

Huldy went to bed happier than she had been in years. The farm she intended buying, and which she knew about only from Mr. Arnold's enthusiastic description, would be near the home of this friendly, agreeable man. Perhaps she would see him every day, perhaps---. She drifted off into a sleep in which she dreamed that she was in Mr. Arnold's arms and that he was vigorously insisting that she marry him.

Mr. Arnold's sleep was not nearly so placid and exhilarating. Nothing, simply nothing, must be allowed to come between him and Huldy's six thousand dollars. The farm he planned to sell her was mortgaged and he was about to lose

it. The same was true of the half section he lived on. His wife had died the year before, his family of children were costing him more than he could afford, and he wanted to marry his dead wife's much younger sister. He was a thrifty man of small vision who hated being in debt and who knew that his type of man needed an ambitious wife to keep him in line. When he finally went to sleep, it was with the avowed purpose of seeing that no one should beat Huldý out of her money before he could.

Next morning he was down stairs, had eaten his breakfast, and was waiting in the parlor when Huldý came down.

"Good morning, Huldah," he greeted her when she entered the parlor. "I hope you slept well."

Huldý assured him that she had and blushed furiously in remembrance of the dream she had had about him. She was disappointed when she learned that he had already breakfasted but when Arnold saw her distress, he consented to have another cup of coffee with her. Then they went to see the lawyer that he always employed to do his legal work.

"This man, Lawyer Deeds, is honest as the day is long," he told her, "you won't need anybody to look after your interests. He'll see that you're taken care of."

When all the legal details were completed, Huldý found that she had paid Arnold five thousand dollars for his farm and given him a mortgage on the land for two thousand dollars

with interest at ten percent. When she left the office to buy the supplies she would need before returning to the Saline, Lawyer Deeds turned to Arnold and asked,

"What sort of land is this you've sold the woman, anyway? The price is three, four, or five times higher than I've known of any quarter of land to sell for around here, let alone with a mortgage on it to boot."

Arnold reddened slightly and answered, "Well, it might be a little high, but someone was going to beat that fool woman out of her money and I thought she ought to have a farm out of it anyway."

"This isn't your home place, is it?" Lawyer Deeds wanted to know.

"Of course, it isn't my home place. It's south of there on the other side of the river."

"Some pretty rough land in there, as I remember. I hope this isn't the kind of deal I am beginning to think it is, Mr. Arnold."

Lawyer Deeds' conscience was stirring belatedly. He realized that a good deal of money had changed hands in his presence and that he himself had charged only his usual nominal fee. He felt that the least he could do was to censure Arnold for what he began to realize was undoubtedly a dishonest transaction.

Arnold took his leave without making any answer. He



suddenly noticed that the sun was rising higher in the sky, he remembered that he wanted to get his financial affairs straightened out before leaving town, that he had his trading to do, and that, if possible, he would like to get home before dark.

Huldy felt nigger rich. So much money to spend. She bought clothes for herself and Oral besides bolts of cloth, batts of cotton, yards of lace and embroidery, and stacks of bedding. She piled her wagon high with food.

"We'll have all we want to eat for the rest of our lives, by hell," she told the boy confidentially, "and we'll have good beds, too, as soon as we can make a trip in for more stuff. Maybe I ought to buy another wagon and a team of horses and get some furniture while we're here."

Without stopping to consider that it would be some time before she would need two wagons to haul away what she would raise on her farm, she got another team and wagon and next day she and Oral set out with the two lumber wagons loaded high. They hurried along on the trail because Huldy didn't want to spend a night in the open. She wanted to be under her own roof for a change.

"I'll lead out," she told the boy, "you follow me, and now don't hurry your horses too much."

"I'll have to keep up with you or I won't know where you're going, will I Maw?" Oral asked, but Huldy was too

busy and excited to answer him. She wished Mr. Arnold could be with them on the return trip and that the two of them could ride along in his wagon together as they had done on the way in.

"I plum forgot about the divorce," she thought as she lowered herself into the spring seat, "well, I can take care of that any time. I'll be wantin' one myself pretty soon anyway, if the wind's blowin' the way I think it is." And during the long trip back to the river she entertained herself by painting rosy pictures of herself and Aaron Arnold spending the rest of their lives together in a state of marital bliss.

It was well that Huldy's first sight of the farm she had bought was softened by the haze of love. The land was as rough as any she had ever seen, except for a few acres of bottom land down near the river. The well may have been as good as Arnold had described it, but Huldy had no way of knowing because there was no pump in it. In fact, there wasn't much of anything about the place as Arnold, anticipating foreclosure of the mortgage, had stripped it of everything that he could move without being too obvious about it.

Oral's wagon was drawn up beside his mother's on the bleak hillside where the house and out buildings squatted in the fading light of day.

"Gosh, Maw, is this the place?" he wanted to know,

"I thought it would look better than this, didn't you?"

"This has to be the place," Huldý assured him, "I counted off the markers on the section lines as we passed them. This is it and it's all ours to do as we please with from now on."

"It don't look like it's worth all the money we paid for it. Five thousand was a lot of cash; looks like we oughta had a better farm than this. Why if we ever start rollin' down this hill, we'll land in the river, sure as shootin'. And the house! My gosh you could throw a cat through the wall anywheres, looks like to me."

"That'll do, Oral, you unhitch the horses and put 'em in the barn and I'll get our supper. And don't ferget to feed them all they want," she admonished him with a grand gesture.

Huldý hated to admit even to Oral that the place didn't come up to Arnold's description of it. Maybe there was some mistake, but she had followed directions explicitly as to the location of the farm. This had to be it. When she walked into the house there was a scampering of mice and a bat sailed out of a corner and flew into the descending gloom of the fast gathering dusk.

Doubt assailed her. "I just can't understand it," she told herself dismally as she looked around the wretched building, "maybe this isn't the right place after all. I



can't believe Aaron would sell me a place like this and take my money the way he did; and I've got a mortgage on it besides. This must be the wrong place." So she tried to console herself as she threw together a cold supper for herself and the boy.

Even in the bright light of next morning's sun, the farm buildings stood out dismally on the gravel hillside and the farm land had a sterile, bleak appearance.

"It's just gumbo land, that's all it is," Oral told his mother after he had looked around the farm and come to the house for breakfast. "I'll bet you couldn't so much as raise a disturbance down there on that sandy bottom, let alone on the rough land that's been plowed up. I think Mr. Arnold rooked you good, Maw, and I bet you don't see him again soon, either."

Oral was wrong about not seeing Aaron Arnold again. He showed up after dinner with a load of shingles on his wagon and with the help of Huldy and Oral started shingling the roof and the sides of the house.

"I've been intending to get this done all spring," he told Huldy, "but I haven't had time. Now with you folks to help me, we'll soon get the job done."

Their hammers rang until darkness put a stop to the work and Oral and Arnold sat in the lamplight in the newly cleaned kitchen while Huldy fried meat and baked biscuits on

the sheet metal stove she had bought in Fort Hays. Arnold bragged lavishly on the meal Huldý set on the table, but inwardly he was thinking,

"She just ain't got the knack of cooking and I'll bet she never could have. I wonder what's the matter with a woman that can't season the vittels. Now this grub ain't the worst I've ever ate, it's just tasteless and flat. But her and the boy are eatin' it right down and relishin' it. Everything they eat must taste the same to them."

Though he mentally disparaged the food, Arnold ate heartily and after supper sat around and visited with Huldý and Oral. When Oral had gone to bed, Huldý and Arnold continued to sit in the kitchen talking and they became so well acquainted that he stayed until morning.

"If you can't have what you want, you have to take what you can get." Arnold told himself morosely as he drove home next morning in the bright sunlight of the new day, "now I'll have to finish that shingle job for her and help her get started farming, and sleep with her off and on till I can talk Faith into marryin' me."

Faith was the sister of his dead wife who had told Arnold that she would never consider marrying him, but who found the man hard to convince. She was the dead Nan's youngest sister and years younger than Arnold.

"I can never marry you Aaron," she told him gently,

"you have to remember that you and Nan were married when I was only five years old and that I have always felt toward you as a brother and I would as soon think of marrying one of my own brothers."

Of course, this was not the real reason for Faith's refusal. She had hated the man practically all her life. He had, indeed, come into the family soon after her father's death when she was a shy, sickly child of five. Arnold had nothing but the clothes on his back when he married Nan Cain; the rest of the family despised him for an ill bred lout and had her father lived, Nan would never have been allowed to marry Arnold when she was sixteen. Since he had no home of his own, he moved in with the Cain family and proceeded to make himself the head of the family. Mrs. Cain, torn between her sense of justice and the intense love she bore her oldest child, tried to be fair, but there was endless dissention and bickering. The older children refused to be dominated and abused by a man they considered their inferior in birth and breeding, but Faith, weak and defenseless, became his whipping boy and on her he vented all his rage and frustration with endless teasing, ridiculing, and occasional slaps and kicks.

"I love the children and I would be willing to take care of them for Nan's sake, but I despise Aaron so much I couldn't possibly live in the same house with him, let alone



live with him," Faith told her mother.

"I think I'd rather see you dead," Mrs. Cain answered quietly and Faith knew that the matter was settled.

Arnold, however, didn't have the advantage of this knowledge and he remained persistent in his attentions to Faith who wanted to avoid an open break because of the Arnold children.

"Bring the young ones over any time you want to, Aaron," Mrs. Cain told him often, we're always glad to have them." So the children spent most of the time with their grandmother and their Aunt Faith on the little farm they occupied on the outskirts of Vale. As the widow of a Civil War veteran, Mrs. Cain drew a small pension. She had her farm clear of debt, there were her cows and chickens, and with a little help from Arnold, she and Faith managed very nicely with the children. But Arnold was not happy with this state of affairs.

"Those women are the best cooks and housekeepers and all-around managers I've ever seen," he ruminated, "a little too independent spirited for me though. But I can break her in and I will, too, when I get her."

In the meantime, with the two older boys away from home and the younger children with their grandmother, he and Huldý could have a pretty fair time together until he got married.

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Joe banged loudly on the kitchen door and then walked in without further ceremony. "Saw your smoke and knew you was up," he announced to Jason who sat eating at the kitchen table. "Yes, I'll have a cup of coffee, thanks. Haven't had any of your cooking in a coon's age. Say, you know, those were the days, Jason," he continued seating himself across the table from Jason and crossing his legs comfortably. "I believe that was the happiest time of my life when you and me was batchin' down there in the dugout and livin' on beans and spring water. I can't remember that I had a care in the world and I worked so hard most days that I laid down and died at night. And we sure had some good times when the work was slack occasionally, playin' cards, and smokin', and even drinkin' a little liquor once in a while; and how you could cook m---."

"What the hell's on your mind? Out with it. You didn't come in here to tell me how much you used to think of me. Seems like you're always bringin' me bad news. What is it this time? Have you let a bunch of cattle stray off?"

"All right, here it is. Have you heard what old Huldy's done?"

Jason was on the alert instantly, his bad humor forgotten. "No. I thought she had headed back east. Well, she

wouldn't be on her way yet, but she ought to be getting her divorce started about now."

"I don't know whether she started a divorce or not, but she sure as hell isn't going back east for a while. No, she bought the Court place from Aaron Arnold. Paid him all the money she had and give him a two-thousand dollar mortgage on the land." The story had grown a little in the telling, but that was the way Joe had heard it.

Jason sat silent. He had an explosive temper but over the years he had learned to control it. At least he had learned that it was not wise to talk wildly in anger and give his listener an opportunity to repeat what he had said. He knew that Joe wouldn't advertise anything he said, but the habit was upon him.

Jason didn't speak for so long that Joe opened his mouth to speak again, but Jason motioned him to be quiet and continued to say nothing. Joe was rather enjoying the situation actually. At least he wished that he might have been in a position to enjoy it as thoroughly as he could have wished. He felt that Jason had given Janie an exceedingly dirty deal and the twins were the object of his special pity. "Poor little cusses brought into the world with no father to look after them," was the way he described them in his own mind and he was glad to see Jason discomfited. Yet he wanted Huldy to leave the country so Janie and the boys could come



home.

The ranch was sure dead without them. He couldn't have thought more of the boys if they had been his own and as for Janie, he loved her like a sister. She had taken care of him when his horse fell on him and broke his leg in two places, the time his tooth was abscessed so bad, and once when he had quinsy and couldn't eat or drink for five days. Of course, it was Jason who brought him into the house each time, who sent for Doc Hale and who helped set his leg and helped lance his tooth and his throat in each case, but Janie had brought him soup and custard, she had fluffed up his pillows and played cards with him and read to him to help while the long hours away, she had kept the children quiet when they annoyed him and let them come in to see him when he felt better and wanted company. Janie was a trump and he sure hoped she and the boys would be moving back soon.

Finally Jason spoke, "And I suppose he's layin' up there with her any time he wants to."

"How did you know? Has someone already told you about it?"

"Nobody had to tell me about it. I know them both, don't I? You just have to get two people like them together and you can guess the rest. But why in hell did she have to run into him, of all people? He's skinned her out of every cent she had, I'll bet he's got a short-term mortgage on

that gravel pile he sold her, and she'll be back over here to blackmail me again any day now. Well, she's shot her wad. She doesn't get any more money out of me, no matter what. But I wanted her out of the country. The boys are still pretty little and I hoped she'd be gone before they were old enough to remember much about all this."

"Why in hell don't you get the divorce, Jason? Now that she's livin' with him whenever he wants her to, you could easy as gettin' a steer to eat grass."

"Well, maybe I will. I'll have to see about it." Jason sat in a musing attitude for so long that Joe concluded hopefully that he was considering details of a divorce action and went back to the bunkhouse before riding out on the range.

"Jason's about ready to sue that old hussy for divorce and it can't be too soon to suit me. If it gets any deader around this place, I'm goin' to leave," he told Tommy.

"Yes, you'll leave here about the same time I do," Tommy answered him, "maybe we could go together."

"You're a damned sight more worthless than I am," Joe told him, "I'm lookin' for somebody better. And let's see some improvement in your cooking for a change, while you're here." This last was said over his shoulder as he headed for the stable.

Jason sat in the kitchen alone. He thought that he

would be glad to sue Huldý for a divorce, if he dared. But he didn't want any court record of what she had to say about defrauding the insurance company. If she ever got on the witness stand and opened her mouth just once, she would tell everything she knew with embellishments.

"There's got to be some way out of this," Jason told himself, "there has to be a way to get rid of that woman permanently so I can get my family back together. Well, I'm going to sit tight for a while. It's all I can do. In six months, Arnold will want shut of her worse than I do, if I'm any judge of human nature. But he'll have her over here to bleed me white before that. Well, she won't get another cent. I was a fool to try buying her off in the first place, but I wanted the thing settled in a hurry. Now this time things will be different. I'll just wait and let that old fool hang herself, and she will, too, one way or another. But my God, what a hell hole this house is without Janie and the boys. Sometimes I think I never will get them back. It gets to looking less like it all the time. I don't suppose there ever was a happier couple than we were. At least if Janie wasn't happy, she didn't show it. And I was. Of course, there was always Huldý in the back of my mind hovering like a vulture waiting to drop down on me. But I never supposed she'd find her way out here. And I never figured what I'd do if she came. I should have been ready for her.



I made my fatal mistake, though, when I entered into that insurance deal with her instead of getting a legal separation and making a clean break. I could pay back the money to the company, but that would be an admission of guilt and I'm more ashamed of that than anything I ever did in my life. Well, all I can do now is lay low and see what turns up. But I think I'd better go up to Vale and do a little explaining to Janie, in case she's already heard what's happened."

Jason dressed carefully in his best casual clothes and rode the three miles into Vale. He had thought first that he would take the buckboard and bring back some supplies, but decided against it when he realized that Janie might think he had come for the boys if he wasn't on horseback. He strode into the store and bought a few articles that he could stow in his pockets.

Daddy Harl was not communicative this morning. Jason's attempts at being affable brought only grunts from the old man who had never liked Jason and now thought less of him than ever. Daddy was perfectly well satisfied with the arrangement whereby Janie did his housekeeping, clerked in the store, wrote all his letters, and managed his affairs in general.

"She's just like her grandmother so far as managing and working's concerned, but she's got a lot better temper.

Not near so cantankerous and set on havin' her own way," he had told Sid White who made trips to the store these days that were not always actually necessary. Sid had grown to be a fine looking man, he had never married; had accumulated considerable property and Daddy had a lot of respect for him but he was not discerning enough to figure out why Sid's trips to the store were becoming so frequent.

"Sid's gettin' as forgetful as the devil," the old man told Janie, "can't remember long enough to get groceries to last him from one day to another. Looks like he's in here every evening for stuff. He ought to make a list of what he needs, it's not business to come to the store that often; it's four miles out to his place."

Janie glanced at Daddy to see whether or not he was joking her and when she realized that he was serious, her sweet face saddened perceptibly. She knew why Sid came to town so often and that it wasn't because he needed groceries.

"Poor Sid," she thought, "I wonder what life would have been like if I had married someone like him--a man not clever and alert as Jason but with better moral values. Jason was always exciting and interesting, though. He could always think of something witty to say. Good people aren't very entertaining, but sometimes they're restful to live around."

When Daddy disparaged and denounced Jason in no

uncertain terms for the way in which he had treated her, Janie would send the children into another room and quietly ignore anything he had to say. The old man certainly had a point, she was forced to admit, when he declared that Jason was a scoundrel, a bigamist, and an all-around blackguard; but she had lived with Jason and loved him and been happy with him, she had felt safe and protected in the warmth of his arms and she could not force herself to speak slightly of him in order to get along with anybody. When forced to take a stand, her refuge was as ever, "Jason's the children's father; I don't want to discuss him."

Finally Daddy had given up trying to get any response to his rantings from Janie, but now that the object of his detestation stood in front of him he could not refrain from telling Jason what he thought of him, if for no other reason than that he would be able to brag about it afterward.

The old man's heart was beating rapidly. He was glad that the counter separated him from the length of Jason's arms and that he was on the side of the store next to the postoffice so that he could dodge behind it in case Jason became actively annoyed.

"It seems to me, Jason," he began his tirade, "that you'd be decent enough to stay away from Janie after all you've done to her--marryin' her illegally, bringin' two children into the world for her to support, neglectin' her



and lettin' her nearly starve, makin' her name a scandal all over the country, and breakin' her heart the way you have."

Jason's emotions welled within him. The little old fellow looked so like a gamey, skinny, fighting cock with its feathers ruffled that he was torn between laughter, shame, pity, and anger. But he had no intention of quarreling with Daddy. After all, the old man was providing for his, Jason's family, and doing a good enough job apparently.

"I wish Mrs. Naylor was alive," Daddy continued, "she'd lay you out right."

"You're doing a fair job yourself," Jason told him dryly, "anything more?" He was pleased that the old man thought enough of Janie to stand up for her; God knew she needed friends. And he had to admit that he was a low-down so-and-so of a rat for the way he had treated her. But she had left him, taken his children and left his house while he was away and before he had had a chance to explain himself, ask her forgiveness, and try to make amends. For that he thought that he could never feel the same toward her. He told himself that, if she had waited, if she had treated him fairly, given him a chance, he would have provided for her properly, even handsomely. But she had shamed him in the eyes of the community and it would be a long time before he could forget it.

Now he stood in the dingy, little store in front of

the shelves where the dry goods were kept and counted the bolts of calico, outing flannel, and muslin. He formed a mental picture of the contents of the store and found himself estimating the value of the stock on the shelves and what was sitting on the floor and the counters. Everything the old fellow had, building and ground thrown in, wouldn't amount to much more than a couple of thousand dollars. For this he had worked a lifetime. If he got sick and wasn't able to run his business any longer, he couldn't sell it for enough to pay someone to take care of him during his remaining years. The old man doubtless realized this better than anyone else. His marriage to the diabetic Mrs. Laton had been disappointing in the extreme and after her death, indeed before, he had lost his zest for matrimony. Now he could hope for nothing better than that Janie would stay and care for him in his old age. Naturally, he didn't want Jason interfering with his plans and would try to discourage him from coming around.

Jason's glance came back to rest on Daddy Harl. The old man's Adam's apple was jerking up and down spasmodically in his skinny, wattled neck. In ten years he hadn't aged a bit; he had simply reached a certain maturity at a certain time and stayed there.

"And by damn, he hasn't learned anything in all those years, either," Jason told himself, "nor profited by his

experience. Well, no reason why I should argue with him and cause him to split a gussett." He jerked back to reality. Daddy was speaking again.

"I was sayin', Jarrett, or Cummins, or whatever your name is, that you promised Janie you'd get a divorce from that woman and get her to leave the country and then you and her could be married. But she's back here again livin' on a farm she's bought across the river from Arnold's. If she's livin' with him the way people say she is, there's no reason why you can't get a legal separation from her and do the right thing by Janie, is there?"

"No. No reason at all." Jason told him, "why? What about it?"

"Well, what I'm gettin' at is, that you don't keep your word very well and, as I said before, you ought to leave Janie alone until you are ready to do the right thing by her. She moped around for days after you was here the last time, and that makes it bad for the boys. They're not happy when they see their mother grievin' like that."

"What have you got to suggest, that I move out of the picture and that they'll stay here and things will go on as they are?"

"That'd be a good idear. Just leave things as they are; just as they are. Janie's certainly got a right to them boys."



"She has a right to them, sure, but I have a duty toward them," Jason reminded him, "and anyway a woman can't bring a couple of boys up right. They'd land in the pen."

"Not Janie's boys. Not if they're anything like her, they wouldn't."

"I get the implication," Jason told him, "but even if they did stay clear of the law, they wouldn't amount to anything. Janie just isn't strict enough with them. Her heart's too soft for her to raise boys right."

"Janie's not so soft. Just remember she left you and you haven't got her back yet. And anyway I'm here. I can manage 'em," Daddy boasted.

"But how long will you be here? We have to think of that. The boys are mere babies in comparison to your age. You'd never live to raise them."

Jason's words were reasonable, but from the look on the old man's face he realized that they had been brutal, too. Daddy seemed to shrink where he stood and Jason, too late, regretted the harshness that his tone had carried.

Wishing to put an end to the interview, he said, "Well we could argue for days about this and not convince each other either. I'll see Janie some other time. You can tell her I'll be back past, maybe, later in the day. I've got some business up on Dry Creek to look after now. Have to see Dare about some cattle he wants to sell."

Jason walked out of the store into the bright sunshine of May. He looked up and down the main street of the little town at the fresh green of the cottonwoods, wrinkled his nose at the cotton that blew from their clusters of ripened seed pods, mounted his horse and started toward Dry Creek and Dare's place. When he had turned the corner at the north end of town and ridden west toward the river, he saw Doc Hale's rig coming toward him, the lines hanging slack from the doctor's hands.

"Old Doc's asleep," Jason mused, "wonder how many miles Tom and Jerry have hauled him home while he dozed. I'm betting, though, he wakes up before I get to him."

As Jason had predicted, old Doc roused from his sleep and hailed him as he drew alongside the buggy. "Why hell, Jason," he said "I've been wanting to see you. This is luck. Tie your horse on the back and get in."

"I'm headed for Dry Creek," Jason answered him. He didn't feel as though he wanted to visit with Old Doc.

"You haven't got any business over there that can't wait," Doc told him, "get in. Have you been to the revival meeting down by the dam? There's two preachers here from God doesn't know where. One's a preacher anyway and the other's a singer and the mourner's bench is filled up every day and night, too. Everybody's quit their work to attend and get converted."

"Is that where you're going; to get converted?" Jason wanted to know.

"No, and you don't have to get sarcastic about it. I'm no worse than you are, if what I've been hearing is right."

"You haven't heard it any better than what it is, I'd swear," Jason grunted as he seated himself beside Doc. "Are we going to the revival?"

"Well, why don't we drive down by the dam anyway? My horses are hot and tired and they could stand some water and I hear the Ladies Aid is selling cold lemonade. I could drink a gallon. Haven't had anything to eat or drink either since I left home before daylight this morning. Didn't take time to fill my water jug."

"Where in thunder have you been that anybody hasn't fed you all day?"

"Well, Mrs. Patton practically threw me out of her house this morning, but I'll tell you about it later; here we are at the revival."

From the big tent staked out among the trees near the mill dam came the sounds of singing and shouting.

"I'll bet it's hot as hell in that tent today," Doc commented, "well they can have it. I see there's a few more that think so, too. Good many young couples strolling along the river bank. Here, lead Jerry down to the water for me."



I had some grain along for the team, but they haven't had a drink."

While the horses drank, the two men passed remarks about the size of the tent, the number of people who would probably be converted, and how long their conversions would last.

"Not very long," Doc commented, "Remember the one they had down here last summer? Well, in thirty days you would never have known that any sort of a religious awakening had taken place. Everybody was right back where they'd been before: swearin', and stealin' and gossipin' just as they'd been doing. I can't see much good it all does."

"It's a great place for young people to get together," Jason commented, "they come from miles around to these meetings. A regular rash of marriages broke out soon after the preachers were gone last year."

"It's a damned good thing they do get married," the doctor growled, "take my word for it, Jason, there's more souls made than saved at these affairs. I know."

"Well, what the hell are we doing here, anyway? Do you want it noised around that you're getting religion?" Jason was becoming impatient. He certainly didn't want people coming up to him and urging him into the tent, or asking him to stay for dinner and attend the meeting afterward. Well, there they were now coming out with their camp meeting chairs

in their hands or under their arms. If Jason had been in any mood to appreciate beauty, he might have admired the chairs as their owners carried them out and placed them for safe keeping in or near their wagons and buggies. The chairs were mostly of walnut with curved backs ornamented with carving and decorative knobs. The seats and backs were of brightly flowered Brussels carpet so that they would fold for easy transportation.

Jason's attention drifted back to Doc who was speaking again, "I came down here to look for Patton. Do you see anything of him?" As he spoke, Doc looked curiously at Jason to see what effect his words might have. Jason was surveying the crowd, his face unperturbed. "No, I don't see him. The old hypocrite must be here, though. What was it you wanted of him? Is Mrs. Patton sick?"

"No, not Mrs. Patton. It's that girl, Maggie Kirby, that's worked for them so long. I was called over this morning to see her. She must have given them quite a scare, because it was a hurry-up call and I started out before day. When I got there, she was in bed, more scared than sick it looked to me. Well, it didn't take long to figure out what ailed her. Of course, she denied it and so did Mrs. Patton when I had to tell her that Maggie was in a family way."

"The idea of saying a thing like that about a girl that works in my house," she told me.

"'You won't have to take my word for it ma'am,'" I told her, "anybody with half an eye can tell it in another month."

"Well, her old face was red enough to bleed and if she had opened her mouth she would have gushed venom, so I walked out. I didn't have to argue with her. But now I want to see Patton."

"You don't mean you think it's his?" Jason was maliciously sarcastic.

"Well, it's sure as hell somebody's and it'll have to be provided for, the poor little devil. I don't see why these things have to happen to an innocent child. Talk about everybody being born free and equal! What kind of a chance will this baby have?"

"Not much of a one," Jason agreed, "it's about all Maggie can do to support herself and her old parents without another mouth to feed. I never thought she was real bright, myself."

"She isn't, that's the shame of it. Well, I don't see him in the crowd coming out of the tent. I'll get out and inquire for him. Do you want to hook the horses up again, Jason? I'll be back in a little bit and we'll go on. I'd like to get this over with, though, while I'm down in

Jason laughed mirthlessly, "Old Kuley's probably at it."



this section of the country."

The doctor returned in a short time. "Nobody's seen him all day. Of course, his wife didn't tell me he was here; I just supposed he would be. Did I mention that he left right after I come on the place? You wouldn't think wild horses could keep him away from a meeting like this where he'd have a chance to pray and maybe preach a little and shake so many women's hands. I just can't believe yet that he isn't smirkin' around here some place."

"If he pulled out right after you got there, he probably wouldn't come down here, figuring you'd track him to the meeting. He won't be very anxious to see you until this thing is settled and I'd like to lay you a bet that he crawls out of it one way or another," Jason prophesied darkly.

"If Mrs. patton had been reasonable, I could have discussed the matter with her," Old Doc worried, "but she got right up on her high horse and I was afraid whatever I said would just make it worse for Maggie and she's in a bad enough spot the way it is. Well, let's get out of here. Say, I saw Arnold over in the crowd trying to shine up to that pretty sister-in-law of his. I gathered she's been singing in the evangelist's so-called choir and that Arnold's about to get converted just from hanging around after her and attending the meetings so much."

Jason laughed mirthlessly, "Old Huldy's probably at

his house working her head off for him right about now. I'll bet he's got her patching and baking and scrubbing for him without paying her a nickel. Joe tells me there's a well-worm path from his house to hers and that he's built a foot bridge across the river at the ford."

"That could be exaggerated. I think she is at his house most of the time, though. She's supposed to be his housekeeper and he's putting in all the time he can in the field. Though why he needs a housekeeper so bad when his children stay at his mother-in-law's place most of the time, I wouldn't know. But the story that disturbs me is that he's sold her that place for three or four times what it's worth, with a mortgage on it to boot, and that he's borrowed what money she had left without giving her any security. He ought to be horsewhipped."

Jason said nothing. Thought of the money he had paid Huldy gave him a dull ache in the stomach and he could have kicked himself for having paid her a dime. If only he had given the matter more thought, he could surely have gotten rid of her easier, cheaper, and more permanently. This was just another instance where money wouldn't take care of everything.

The two men had left the site of the camp meeting, crossed the ford below the dam, and were in Vale again when the old Doc said, "I see your boys playing in the yard behind

the store, Jason. Why don't we stop and see them a minute?"

"Yes, I'd like to. I came up here with the intention of seeing them and Janie this morning, but I stopped in the store first and had an argument with old Harl. By the time I was through with him, I was out of the notion of visiting my family."

Old Doc stopped his team in the side street back of the store and he and Jason got out to talk to the pair of delighted little boys who came running to see them. Doc Hale found some candy in his pocket and while the twins were eating it, he turned to Jason and said,

"Are you going in the house?"

"No, I don't think I will now," Jason answered slowly, "I wanted to explain to Janie why Huldy hasn't gone, but according to Harl she already knows about it. Anyhow I'm not in the notion now. I wish Harl wasn't the age he is; I feel like jumping onto somebody and he'd do as well as anyone."

"Then I'm going in to see Janie," the old Doc said, "she's one of my favorite people, you know. The Missus and I think a lot of her and the boys. Anything you want me to tell her?"

"No. Guess not." Jason tried to make his voice sound indifferent. "But say, if you could bring it up about how Huldy double crossed me, maybe it wouldn't hurt any. And tell her I'll try to work out something."



Ten or fifteen minutes later, Doc came out of the back door and Jason told him, "I think I'll get on my horse and jog back to the ranch now, Doc. See you later."

"Like hell you will," the doctor shouted, "why the devil do you think I stopped you up there along the road? I'm going home with you and you're going to give me my dinner, by thunder, or I'll know the reason why, you confounded skin-flint."

"All right, all right, Jason answered him, "I'm going to give you your dinner. I had forgotten what time of day it was. I can't eat like I used to. Tommy's cooking doesn't taste like much any more and mine's worse."

"No. When you don't have anybody to set across the table from you, the grub's not much good no matter what you're eating. Jason, I don't know what it is you've got to hide, but I know there's more to all this than you're letting on. I'm not asking for your confidence, but I have got some advice I want you to consider. Why don't you go back to the place where you made your first wrong turn and try to straighten it out? On the surface, there doesn't appear to be a reason in the world why you can't get a legal separation from Huldy, marry Janie, and get your family back together and because you don't, I know there's more to this affair than what meets the eye. So I say, go back and get things straightened out."

him as Jason made no answer. He had no intention of baring his breast to anyone, not even old Doc, and finally the doctor continued,

"The Missus and I are looking forward to the day when you'll have your family together again and we can come visit you like we used to. That's what we're hoping for, and if there's anything either of us can do to bring that about, we're willing to do all we can. Personally, I think it's a good thing Huldy stayed here and has acted the way she has. People have a pretty good insight into her character now. Before this, nearly everyone thought it was your duty to take her back and live with her, but today, after the way she and Arnold have carried on, she isn't getting much sympathy. Look at it that way, Jason, for the sake of Janie and the boys. And now about Janie. I can't feel that you've treated her right and she doesn't either."

"I told her before she left the ranch that I wouldn't do anything for her if she left, and she went anyway. She didn't have to leave like she did."

"Not when you had told her that she couldn't have the boys? Was she supposed to go away and leave them with you? You know she couldn't do that and you know she couldn't stay there with you either. Not Janie or any other decent woman. A woman'll run away with a man when she first knows him and when she's head over heels in love with him, and live with

him without legal ties, but she won't stay after she's lived with him ten years, or even five, and finds that they're not married. And who could blame her? No, I say you haven't been fair to Janie refusing to support her and threatening to take her children from her. It might be well to remember that she's free as the air and can get married whenever and to whoever she wants."

Jason started perceptibly, then smiled with self-satisfaction. "Not Janie. She's true blue. There's the chance she won't come back to me, of course, but I'm not afraid that she'll marry anybody else. And you're right about straightening out my affairs and starting in new. I've been thinking about it myself. Well, here we are at the ranch. I expect our best bet is some of Tommy's cooking and then we'll go over to the house for a drink. I'm glad you happened along. The place is pretty dreary these days."

Jason and Doc Hale arrived at the Circle C just as the men were filing out of the bunkhouse kitchen, but Tommy was one of those old-fashioned cooks who believed in cooking enough for dinner so that he would have plenty to warm over for supper and he assured Jason that it would be no trouble to feed them.

When the meal was over, Jason led the way to the house. When they entered the back door, Doc Hale's nostrils were assailed by the odor of dust, stale tobacco smoke, and



an indefinable, musty odor that he supposed came through the basement door that stood half open.

The old doc looked around in sorrow at the curtains hanging slack and lifeless at the windows, at the dust and lint on the furniture, at the grease spattered stove, and the tracks on the kitchen floor.

"My God, Jason," he sputtered, "you ought to at least air this place out. Or better still, get someone to clean it up. The way it looks, you don't ever expect Janie to come back. You can't give up hope like this, man."

"I've not given up hope," Jason denied, "But why the hell would I want to keep the house clean? In the first place, I haven't time and in the second place, I don't care. I built the house for Janie; if she doesn't want to live here, it can damn well go to pot."

"But that's not the way to look at it," Doc argued, "remember in the army how we kept ourselves clean even if we were losing? Well, that's the way it has to be in life, too. When you start letting things get dirty, you're going downhill and nobody can pull you back up but yourself."

Jason would have liked to tell Old Doc where to head into with his good advice, but he realized that the old fellow was talking sense so he said,

"All right, you come back in a couple of weeks and I'll have it scooped out to suit you. And you tell the

Missus I'm coming over for one of her good meals in a Sunday or two."

When the doctor drove away an hour later, he looked back at the ranch before he crossed the ford and it seemed to him that the very trees that shaded the house and the lawn hung their heads over the change that had taken place in their surroundings.

Old Doc had intended to tell Jason of how Patton had deliberately insulted Janie in her own house, but the time had not seemed propitious with Jason in his present mood. In fact, the old man had entertained the idea of telling Jason in Patton's presence, if the latter could have been found at the camp meeting.

"Every damned thing I laid out to do today fell flat," Old Doc told Tom and Jerry as he flicked their backs with the tip of the buggy whip, "now let's get on home and see what's gone wrong there. I've a notion to go back yet and tell Jason and stay with him to see that he doesn't go over and kill Patton for insultin' Janie. But he's not in any humor to hear about it even from me today; Patton'll just have to take his chances."

So it was that Jason heard the story from another source.

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To Jason the summer wore on almost without event. He felt that his hands were effectually tied. Huldy was making a bigger fool of herself than even he had thought possible over Aaron Arnold but as yet she had not come to him for more money nor had she, so far as he knew, made any attempt to start action for a divorce. Inaction would drive him frantic, he thought, so he spent long days in the saddle, ate most of his meals at the bunkhouse with the men, and spent as little time as possible at the house. There wasn't much in the downstairs bedroom he now occupied to remind him of either Janie or the children. He had carried everything that was theirs to the top story and seldom went upstairs. True to his promise to Doc Hale, he had asked Mrs. Sprague and her daughter to clean the house.

Mrs. Sprague had been none too friendly when Jason approached her, but she needed the money and she thought she couldn't bear for anybody else to work in Janie's house and handle her possessions. The sight of so much house moss and so many dust mice appalled her, but the two women spent three days at the job and Jason made an agreement with Mrs. Sprague whereby she would come twice a month in the future and keep the house clean.

Jason felt better in the shining house with freshly-laundered curtains at clean windows and with the floors and furniture free from dust. But the place was still not home



and he wondered now if it would ever be. Believing that Huldy would not return to the ranch, Jason relaxed his vigilance. He no longer stayed close to the place nor did he leave one of the men in charge.

"That old rip is surely ashamed to come down here again to bleed me for money," he soliloquized, "she knows I wouldn't give her more anyway."

One afternoon in early September he came in from a hard day's work on the range to find Tommy asleep in the bunkhouse and a horse tied to the hitchrack in the back yard. He recognized the horse as one belonging to Aaron Arnold and wondered what the man could possibly want with him.

When Jason entered the back door, he sensed instantly that someone was in the house. His loud "hallo" was followed by the sound of steps descending the stairs and when he opened the door leading into the central hall, Huldy was just rounding the newel post.

"I thought I told you never to come into this house," Jason told the flustered, red-faced woman, "and here you've been pilfering through my possessions while I was gone. This place was locked. How did you get in?"

"I kicked out a basement window and come in that way," Huldy admitted defiantly, "and just what can you do about it anyway? I've got as good a right in this house as you have, Mr. Cummins."

Jason laughed mirthlessly. "Your rights," he mocked her. "It never enters your head that anybody else would have any, does it? You and I had an agreement. I gave you a certain sum of money and you promised to leave the country. Up to date, you haven't carried out your part of the bargain in any particular. And now I come home and find you prowling around my house. What were you after?"

"Well, I need money," Huldry blurted, "and I supposed you would have some here in the house. Everybody thinks you have because one of the men's always around the place when you leave. But today old Tommy had hit the bottle a little hard and was asleep when I rode in."

"So you need money," Jason said ignoring the slam taken at Tommy, "what's become of what I gave you?"

"You know what went with it. You know I bought a farm and had to stock it and make a crop and that it's all cost money. You know all that."

"Yes," Jason told her, "I know all that and more. I know you've let Arnold make a complete fool of you. He sold you a piece of land that's nothing but a gravel pile with a house on it little better than a shed; you let him borrow the rest of what money you had left, and now he's sent you down here to bleed more cash out of me."

"How did you know all that?" Huldry was caught off guard and her surprise forced an admission.

"Why else would you have come down here? Well, you won't find any money in the house; that isn't where I keep it. And you'll not get any more out of me no matter what you do or say."

"Well, if I'm to get a divorce, I have to have money to start it with. What you give me wasn't enough. Not near enough. Mr. Arnold says you swindled me."

"He's a good one to talk about swindling someone after what he's done to you," Jason observed dryly.

"What have you got against Mr. Arnold?" Huldy wanted to know, "he's no worse a scoundrel than you are."

"Maybe not," said Jason answering her last remark first, "but he hasn't made a success of it like I have. And now here's some advice I'm offering you free."

"You and your advice," Huldy snorted, "what's wrong with it?"

"Well, you use your own judgment, of course, but I'm telling you that you had better leave this part of the country. When you fool around with a man like Arnold, you're just courting disaster. When he's tired of you, if he can't get rid of you in one way, he will in another. You've made a fool and a prostitute of yourself and everybody knows it."

"What do you mean a prostitute?" Huldy's voice was shrill with rage.

"I mean that Arnold lays with you any time he wants to



and then goes around bragging about it."

"I don't believe it. I know he wouldn't talk about me. That's another one of your dirty lies. Mr. Arnold and me are going to get married."

"In a pig's eye you are. He wouldn't marry you if you paid him to. He's got his eye peeled for someone else. He intends to marry his wife's youngest sister, if she'll have him, which I doubt."

"That skinny white-faced heifer! He'll never marry her."

"I don't think he will either, and for a damned good reason; she won't have him. But he doesn't know that yet, so he's still trying. I saw them together at the camp meeting."

"I don't believe a word you say, Jason Cummins," Huldy insisted, "Mr. Arnold is a fine man. We've talked about getting married for a long time; and now, as soon as you give me the money for a divorce, I'll get one and then we'll be married and I won't ever bother you again. Mr. Arnold says that you cheated me when you paid me off, though, and that you'll have to make up for that and I know he's right about it because he wouldn't lie to anybody."

Jason snorted mirthlessly and derisively. "No, he wouldn't lie to anybody! He's sure made a sucker out of you and now he's sent you down here to bleed me for more money.

Well, I'm through. Neither of you gets another cent no matter what. And now get out. I told you I never wanted to see you in this house and here you've broke in while I was gone and tried to rob the place. Now get out. And stay out."

Jason stood aside with the door open and the knob in his hand ready to close the door when Huldry had gone. But she was not so easily gotten rid of and could not forbear a parting shot.

"At least Mr. Arnold has never changed his name and he says that the fact that you have, in--incriminates you."

"You can tell him for me that I haven't changed my name; I simply dropped part of it. My name is Jason Jarrett Cummins for my grandfather, Jason Jarrett. If I wanted to take his name, there's no reason why I shouldn't. Is there?"

"Well, maybe not, but it looks suspicious." Jason had somewhat taken the wind out of Huldry's sails, but, looking around the house and thinking how it should be hers and what a happy life she and Arnold could lead here, she was constrained to drop a little venom.

"Well, this is a fine house you've got here, but it looks like you'll spend the rest of your life in it alone. That pretty-lookin' little Janie ain't losin' any time findin' her a man. You're in such a hustle to get rid of me, but I bet she wouldn't marry you for any money now that she's got

a younger man picked out. Or at least a man that's nearer her age."

"Now who's that, Mrs. Cummins? Let's hear all the gossip. I'm sure you have a good reliable source for everything you have to tell."

"Everybody knows Sid White's runnin' up to the store every day for groceries, and everybody's laughin' about where he can be puttin' everything he buys. He sure can't eat it all. And if he can't persuade her, there's always Tom Patton, of course." This last was said with a leering, knowing look reminiscent of Aaron Arnold and Jason was instantly furious.

"Just what do you mean by mentioning Janie's name in connection with Patton's?" he asked ominously.

"I mean, Mr. Jarrett, that Mrs. Spencer walked in and found Mr. Patton and your pretty Janie in a "compromising position" in her bedroom and that it's being talked about all over the country."

"That's enough. Anybody that would repeat such a thing about Janie is either a liar or a fool or both. Now go: and don't come back."

With mixed emotions, Huldý rode slowly back along the trail that led from the Circle C to Aaron Arnold's modest four-room, stone dwelling. She was half inclined to turn toward her own house and postpone the meeting with Arnold



until the next day.

"He'll be madder'n a bull in a field of red clover," she told herself. "I never did hate doin' anything like I hate to disappoint him about the money he expects me to bring. Dam' Jason Cummins anyway. If I wasn't married to him, I could marry Aaron right away. It wouldn't have hurt him to give me a few hundred dollars more at least. But no, he didn't even ask how much I wanted; he just turned me off without a cent. And I haven't got any money at all now what with havin' to pay for my farm and buyin' stock and machinery, and loanin' Aaron all I could, and everything. And I can't get a divorce and marry Aaron until I get some more money one way or another. Well, I'd just as well get this over with. But Aaron will be mad."

Arnold was a violent man and well might Huldy dread his temper. It was only occasionally that he ever gave her a word of praise nowadays despite the fact that she did all his chores and house work and shared his bed and board without any cost to him. True enough, he did help Oral with the cattle once in a while and instruct him about the proper methods of farming, but even so Huldy was beginning to feel that she was giving more than she received, especially since there were persistent rumors of Arnold's infatuation for Faith Cain. She watered the horse at the river, put him in the barn and grained him, then walked to the house.

"Well, you was gone long enough," Arnold greeted her from the table where he stood peeling potatoes, "how much money did you get? Where is it?"

"I didn't get any this time, Aaron," she told him and stepped backward toward the door when she saw his face flush with rage. It wouldn't have been the first time he had struck her, and if he made a threatening move, she planned to run for home.

"Why the hell didn't you get any?" he wanted to know.

"Jason says he won't pay another cent. Of course, I didn't keep my part of the bargain, but I told him he cheated me in the first place and that he ought to be willing to pay more."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He says he don't care what I do now, that he simply won't be bled any more."

"Bleed him? Of course not. But milk him, yes. You didn't go at it right. Now you're going back down there tomorrow and one way or another you're going to get more money out of him, by damn, or I intend to foreclose on your livestock and machinery. Just remember I've got a chattel mortgage on that stuff and you've used it all summer to put in a crop and haven't paid a cussed cent of interest, let alone anything on the principal. Your land's mortgaged, too, and you'd better make the interest payment on time, or I'll

have to foreclose on that, too."

Huldy was aghast. Here was the man she loved desperately, the man she had handed all her money, the man she had sacrificed for, and worked for, telling her that he would put her out on the road. She thought of the rough, rocky ground she had bought, the two lank cows Arnold had sold her, the rickety drill and rusted plow, the broken-toothed harrow, the blue gumbo down by the river with its thin stand of feed-stuff for winter, and a chill settled in her bones.

"But I can't get any more money out of Jason, I tell you. I know by the way he talked that he won't pay anything more and he says he don't care what I do; he simply won't pay out any more money. Jason's awful close. It's a wonder he ever paid me anything. If I'd only had sense enough to have kep' what he give me, I'd be all right now."

Arnold was in a foul mood. During the afternoon, he had stopped in at his mother-in-law's house to see his children and incidentally Faith. As he was leaving, Mrs. Cain said to him,

"Aaron, there's a lot of talk going around about you and that Cummins woman. It isn't the sort of talk that does your reputation any good either. It will make it bad for the children, especially May and Ruby. It's hard for little girls to live down that kind of thing. You ought to get rid of that woman and stop the gossip."



A latent sense of shame arose in Arnold's consciousness. It angered and humiliated him to think that it had been necessary for the proud old lady to chide him about his conduct. So that was the reason Faith hadn't come in for a word with him. He had seen her in the yard when he drove up, but when he asked for her, "she had gone for the cows" her mother said.

His thoughts came back to Huldy standing just inside the thick stone doorway. Why couldn't the woman realize how coarse and repulsive she actually was? She was never really clean, her clothes were always dirty or torn, or both, her hair looked as though it had never known a comb, her shoes were always run-over and unpolished, and her hands--soiled and always chapped with torn and ragged nails, they were the most conspicuous part of her body because she never knew what to do with them. Right now she was twisting them nervously in a fold of her apron while her mouth twitched in unison with their motion.

"Well, there's just one thing about it," Arnold was saying with finality, "more money, or you'll have to get out."

"But why couldn't you let me have some money, Aaron, to get a divorce?" Huldy questioned. "I've got to have it before we can marry and it's for your interest as well as mine."

So the woman actually thought he wanted to marry her.

Well, she was no good to him any more. There wasn't a thing he would gain by marrying her, not a thing.

"You just suit yourself about a divorce," he told her smoothly, "I can wait."

"Yes, you can wait now. You've robbed me of what money I had and you intend to take the little property I've got left. You couldn't wait to do all that though."

"You wanted to buy that land didn't you?"

"Yes, but I supposed it would be better ground than it is. I had never seen it and I took your word that it was a good farm."

"It is a good farm and you could have seen it any time. It was layin' right out in plain sight for anybody to see that wanted to. You're a grown woman and you'll have to learn to look out for yourself in this world because it's nobody else's business to do so," Arnold told her virtuously as though he were scolding her for having been remiss in her duty.

"You ought to have threatened Jarrett about the insurance," Arnold went on. That'da brought him to time. Tell him you'll notify the company that he's out here alive and well and let him chew on that for a while."

"He knows I wouldn't do that. He knows I'd be in as much or more trouble as he'd be in if the insurance company went after us."

"Let's see now, that was the People's Insurance Company, wasn't it?"

"With offices in New York and Cincinnati," Huldý supplied importantly.

"Uh huh. Well, you finish up supper and get the dishes done and go on home. People are talking about you for staying around here so much. They think it's not decent for a married woman to hang around a widower all the time like you've been doing; and I'm afraid I've got to agree with them. I have to think about my reputation."

"Your reputation? What about mine, or don't that matter to you? But if we're goin' to get married, it don't make any difference anyway," she finished placatingly.

Get married! The damn woman kept harping on it all the time. Couldn't she think of anything else? Why he wouldn't eat her cooking for the rest of his life, if he had to. He was a vain man and he couldn't help ogling and leering at practically any woman, but he was certainly fed up with this one and now he was faced with the problem of how to rid himself of her.

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After Huldý had gone, Jason sat for a long time at the kitchen table. He had no appetite for any food he might prepare himself or for any that Tommy might have waiting for



him in the bunkhouse.

Jason lived over many years as he sat there. Memory took him back to his earliest days as a small child in his mother's arms. He remembered his sister Mary, his Aunt Ann and his cousin Pearl. They had all been good women and had influenced his life for the better. Then he recalled a great many women who had not been so good and who had had no part in influencing him toward a better life. At last he allowed his mind to dwell on Janie and the years they had lived together.

"I had almost forgotten Huldry," he thought, "almost forgotten that there was a person like her. Why did she have to appear out of thin air like a spell of indigestion after a good dinner? And that damned insurance affair--there's going to be hell to pay over that, or I miss my guess. That fool woman has talked too much; someone will make trouble. And she hasn't gained a thing by coming out here, not a thing."

In the yard, Tommy shouted that the men were eating everything on the table and that not a scrap of grub would be left. Jason went to the door and answered that he would fix something in the house, but he had no appetite and drank a cup of cold coffee from the pot on the stove.

He thought that he could never ask Janie if Patton had insulted her, that he could never cause her the embarrassment of questioning her about the affair. Not for a minute

did he place any credence in what Huldý had told him in the heat of anger. Yet there might be something to the story and he could not ignore it because Patton would doubtless repeat the offense some day when Daddy Harl was gone and Janie was alone in the store. There was nothing for it but that he must pay the man a visit and surely he could tell by Patton's actions whether there was any truth in the gossip that was going the rounds. He guessed that he had better attend to the matter the first thing in the morning.

The trail to Patton's ranch led through Vale, but Jason had no inclination to stop and see Janie and the boys this morning. He was haunted by the feeling that he would doubtless never have his family together again at the ranch and seeing and visiting with them was almost like looking on the faces of the dead. However, he did make a survey of the store as he passed, noted that there was smoke issuing from the kitchen chimney, and decided that Janie was probably getting breakfast while the old man arranged stock on the shelves.

Jason was well aware as his horse singlefooted along the trail that Patton was from long experience undoubtedly an expert in taking care of himself when confronted by some angry father, brother, or husband of a woman he had mistreated or insulted so he would have to depend on the surprise element when he tackled the man. He figured that, with

his senses alerted, he could tell by Patton's face whether or not he was guilty.

"And damn him he'd better not be, or I'll give him the drubbing of his life," Jason decided.

As Jason approached the house, he had to admit that Patton's ranch was certainly well situated. Like most of the other cattle ranches in that area, the buildings were close to the river, too close, Jason thought in case of a flood, and they were shaded by some fine old elms and cottonwoods.

"Well, the devil's had his breakfast and is headed for the stable," Jason deduced when he saw Patton in the yard. "And now he sees me and he's stopped on the other side of that wagon. He's guilty as hell and means to keep the wagon between us so I can't get my hands on him. Well, maybe that won't work either."

"Good morning, Jarrett," Mr. Patton greeted Jason with forced pleasantries, his face wearing its usual, smiling smirk of sanctimony. "What brings you out so early this morning?"

"There's something I want to take up with you, Patton," Jason's voice held a warning edge.

When Patton heard that Jason and Doc Hale were searching for him at the camp meeting, he knew that there was trouble in store for him. Now he was face to face with it,



but not totally unprepared.

"I am always ready to discuss anything peacefully with anyone, Jarrett," there was a noticeable emphasis on the word "peacefully."

"I'm not feeling exactly peaceful, Patton, toward a man who has deliberately insulted my wife when he found her alone and unprotected."

Patton was still smiling, but he cast a sidewise glance toward the well house that stood just off to his left a few yards and Jason guessed correctly that Patton would dash into the building for protection, if the wagon did not furnish enough.

"Your wife, you say, Jarrett? Which one do you mean?" Mr. Patton couldn't forbear the insult even though he knew it would do him no good.

"You know who I mean."

"You ought to know I wouldn't do anything to make Mrs. Jarrett's life any harder for her. I think she's having a bad enough time the way it is."

"Then in plain English, you deny the whole thing. Is that it?"

Patton was alert enough to realize that Jason had not discussed his actions with Janie, that he was relying on gossip for what information he had and that he was not altogether sure of himself. So he answered,

"In plain English, I do deny ever having had any unclean thoughts about your wife, let alone offering her any insult. Does that satisfy you?"

"No, it doesn't. I think you're a double-dyed liar; and I'm going to beat the hell out of you."

While Patton was talking, Jason had edged around the wagon and placed himself between his intended victim and the well house. The very sight of the man made his blood boil. The idea of treating Janie the way he had the first time he found her alone! He thought he couldn't stand it if he didn't knock the fellow down. But he would have to act fast or Patton would be out of reach.

Jason sprang at Patton, striking him on the nose and causing the blood to spurt. Another swing of his fist knocked him to the ground. Jason was amazed at the ease with which he had accomplished this. Patton was a big man, but he couldn't even defend himself. He ought to do some hard work once in a while and keep in trim. Patton was still on the ground and Jason, standing over him, wondered whether he was badly hurt or whether he feared further punishment, if he got up.

"My God, I hope I haven't killed him," Jason thought as he looked down at Patton. "But if I have, it's good enough for him. With that face, he won't be chasing women for a while anyway. I must have hit him harder than I thought."

Just then Patton moaned and moved his legs experimentally. Jason could see no reason to stay around any longer.

"I've got more punch left than I thought I had," he told himself exultantly as he rode home, "my gosh it's been a long time since I've felt that good about knocking a man down."

No one had seen Jason vent his spleen on Mr. Patton, so that good Christian could tell any kind of story he pleased as to why his face looked the way it did. To his wife he explained that he and Jarrett had gotten into a dispute over some horses and that Jason had attacked him without cause. When Mrs. Patton pressed him for a little clearer explanation, he said that the argument wasn't just about horses in general, but about gaited horses; and intimated that the subject was too deep for a woman to understand.

Mr. Patton stayed at home the necessary week or two that was required for his face to heal properly; and then one morning he told his wife that he was going over to Arnold's to see about buying a fresh cow.

"It seems to me that you have taken to associating with some pretty low characters," Mrs. Patton remarked caustically, "first it's that bigamist, Jarrett, and now it's a man who lives openly with a woman he's not married to. I would think, that for a while at least, even you have done



enough slumming."

"But Sallie, how can I do anything for these wicked people, if I don't associate with them? Anyway, this is a business deal," he resumed briskly, "and I want to catch Arnold before he goes out to the field, if I can. We can't get along without milk, can we? George tells me that our three cows are nearly dry. Besides, I may be able to help Arnold lead a better life; and that will certainly be worth while."

Mrs. Patton grunted disagreeably and went on with her housework. There was a great deal of it for her to do these days, because Maggie Kirby never felt well of mornings and stayed in bed till noon most of the time. Mrs. Patton was beginning to feel that Maggie was taking advantage of her condition because she had become pregnant while in the Patton's employ.

"I'd send her packing fast enough," she confided to her husband, "but the old folks have nothing to live on except her wages and there would be no end of gossip if we turned her out and her in a family way. But it just isn't right that I should do the work and pay her wages for it besides, and I'm getting tired of it."

"Yes, yes, dear, I know how you feel and we have to work out a solution for her some way. And we will. I've been thinking and praying over the matter and I believe I

have it solved; but today, I have some other business I want to attend to."

"Well, I can't see how it will settle anything for you to associate with a person like that Arnold man, Thomas Patton. You could surely buy a fresh cow from somebody respectable just as easily and just as cheaply."

"Just as easily perhaps, but not as cheaply maybe, my dear. But since the thought is displeasing to you, I'll just drive into Vale and inquire at the store--er, inquire around of someone about a cow that we might like to milk. Well, it's getting late, I'll have to go." Mr. Patton realized that mention of the store was perhaps ill-advised and made his way outside where he hitched his driving team to the buggy and started down the trail that led along the river toward Vale.

He didn't stop in the town, however, because he had made up his mind what he intended to do, and being a stubborn man with a single-track mind, he decided that this was the day that he would start to carry out a plan that would put Jason Jarrett where he belonged.

Arnold's house, a tall, narrow, stone building with two rooms up and two down, stood almost on the river bank. The walls were thick and durable, but there was a general air of neglect about the place that showed the lack of a woman's care. Arnold himself was beginning to recognize this

and was becoming impatient with himself, with Huldý, and with Faith Cain.

"She ought to be glad to marry me," he fumed as he admired himself in the glass that morning while he shaved. "What's she putting me off for anyway? I can make her a good living. Of course, there'll be a lot of work here when I bring the children home, but she likes them and they can help her some. What does a damn' woman expect but hard work and plenty of it? It's what they're made for. That and a few other things."

The dogs started barking and Arnold looked out of the window to see who was coming. "Old Nasty-Nice Patton," he thought disgustedly, "if he's come over here to jump onto me about that Cummins woman, I'll tell him a-plenty. He thinks it's up to him to run around over the country and look after people's morals. He'd better clean up his own back yard before he starts lookin' after anybody else's affairs. If he keeps on, he'll have a bastard in every bend of the crick."

But Mr. Patton hadn't come over to jump onto anybody this particular morning; and when Arnold walked out into the yard to meet him, the smile on Mr. Patton's face formed a distinct contrast to the scowl on Arnold's.

"I hear you have some fresh cows," Mr. Patton hastened to say, "is one of them for sale by any chance?"



Arnold was instantly mollified and, though he was not particularly interested in selling a cow, he would be willing to part with one in this case because Patton was a notoriously poor judge of livestock and would probably pay more than the animal was worth, if Arnold held out for his first asking price.

"Yes, I've got some; well broke to milk too, and you know that kind's not easy to come by either. They're down near the corral. I just turned them out a few minutes ago."

Dickering for the cow was short, and to Arnold, beneficial. Buying a cow was not Mr. Patton's main purpose in coming over that morning, and when he had paid a good ten dollars more than the cow was worth and when Arnold was in a mellow mood because of the bargain he had driven, Mr. Patton proceeded to his business.

"You've got a good farm here, Arnold. Fine bottom land, good buildings. The place shows that you are a hard-working man. There's just one thing wrong with it and that's the location."

"Location? What do you mean?" Arnold questioned in surprise. "Besides being well-watered from the river, I've got a spring right over the bank from the house that never goes dry. I'm close to town and close to school. I think I've got one of the best locations in the country for a small farmer."

"That isn't what I mean," Mr. Patton proceeded in his most righteous manner, "your land runs down and joins the Jarrett ranch on the east and that, in my opinion, makes the location bad."

"I guess my line isn't where you think it is," Arnold responded, "I don't own this whole section; just the west half and the section in between isn't Jarretts either. So that puts him nearly two miles away from me."

"It's still too close to live near an immoral man such as Jarrett. Talk about the Mormons! He's got nothing on them. Personally, I feel that the fellow ought to be run out of the country. A vigilante committee such as they had in California in the early days would put the fear of God in him."

"I don't believe Jarrett would leave for the vigilantes or anybody else," Arnold answered, "I believe he'd stay and fight. Whatever else anybody can say about the man, he's not a coward. No, he'd put up a fight and he'd probably win it. Some of the fellows he's got down there have worked for him for years and they all swear by him and they'd fight for him too, if it came to a showdown. Anybody that wanted to run him out of the country, would have to think of a better way than that."

"Such as---?"

"Well, I've often wondered what would happen if the

insurance company he defrauded ever catches up with him."

"There have been some stories afloat about his collecting insurance illegally, but I've never known whether or not there was any truth to it."

"It's the God's truth," Arnold assured Mr. Patton solemnly, but he did not explain how he knew this fact so well and Mr. Patton did not embarrass him by asking for proof. Here was a meeting of kindred souls. Both men had reason to dislike Jason and both of them would have liked to see him stripped of his property. When a man loses his belongings, there's always the chance that other men may get a share of them; and Arnold and Patton would not have been averse to dividing up the Circle C.

"I wonder if it was one of the big companies, an old line company, or some smaller concern," Mr. Patton's remark was not quite a question, but Arnold answered it explicitly.

"It was the People's Insurance Company of New York and Cincinnati."

"Um-m-m-m, that's quite a concern," Mr. Patton mused, "they might make it bad for him, if they ever found that he's out here alive and well. It's a sad thing when men turn dishonest just for financial gain, don't you agree, Mr. Arnold? And by the way, Mr. Arnold, we have a thriving Sunday school at Vale; come over and join us next Lord's day. There's to be services right after the church school and we'd be glad to



have you there. The children always come with their grandmother and their Aunt Faith, and we'd be happy to have you come with them. Well, good day. I'll send one of the men for the cow this afternoon." Without waiting for Arnold's answer, Mr. Patton started for home.

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Daddy Harl was getting the mail ready for the stage that would presently be in on one of its bi-weekly trips to Vale. It was a job he loved and one that he liked to take his time about doing. He held each letter in his hand and weighed it tentatively while he studied the address. He knew the handwriting of each of the postoffice's patrons and he knew the relation that each addressee bore to the person who was sending the letter. In fact, in a great many cases, he knew the contents of the letters because he was acquainted with a neat trick by which a lead pencil could be inserted under the flap of an envelope, given a deft twist and a roll and remove leaving the flap intact and open. After he had read the letter, a quick swipe with the brush that he kept handy in a glue pot would seal it again and nobody, he thought, was ever the wiser.

Daddy complimented himself highly because he never divulged the contents of any of the letters he opened and he would have been surprised to know that there were people in

the community served by his postoffice who mailed their more important letters in Fort Hays. So it was a distinct shock to him, as well as to nearly everybody else in the country, when the stranger arrived in Vale that day.

The stage drew up in front of the store and as soon as the horses had stopped a tall, angular man with a hooked nose and a head that jutted forth from stooped shoulders stepped to the ground.

"Well, here we are, Mr. Lane. This is the city of Vale in the center of Kansas, population one hundred people, more or less; probably less." The stage driver chose to be facetious and Mr. Lane chuckled accomodatingly. He walked to the middle of the sandy street and looked up and down its length noting the autumn foliage on the elms and cottonwoods scattered about the town. The trees had been there when the town was laid out and most of them had not been cut down, but were allowed to grow unrestricted where they stood. The elms were gnarled and wide spreading, their trunks thick and rough barked, and they were covered with heavy leaves that had turned bronze in the sun of autumn. The cottonwoods, faster growing trees and shorter lived, flaunted bright yellow leaves to the wind that sighed in their branches.

Mr. Lane approved of trees and found no fault with those he saw in Vale, but to a man accustomed to living in the better section of a fair-sized city, the houses in the

town presented an appalling aspect. They were mostly one and two room affairs of stone or frame construction fronting on Main Street and instead of lawns they were nearly all surrounded by weed patches or chicken yards.

"What a hole," mused Mr. Lane, "and I'll probably be stuck here a week. Well, at least I can get out of the place as long as the United States mail keeps running; but what a hole."

Diligent questioning of the stage driver had revealed the fact that the town had no hotel, no livery stable, no newspaper, and no running water except that in the mill race that cut across one corner of town. Mr. Lane and the stage driver had visited all the way from Fort Hays, but the stage driver's knowledge of the residents in the Vale community was limited and Mr. Lane had not obtained a great deal of information from him. Mr. Lane, on his part, had only explained that he had business about some land an eastern syndicate owned in the region and that he had come out to look over the property.

There were various boxes and barrels of assorted sizes standing about the store and Mr. Lane appropriated one of these, moved it to a corner where he would be out of the way of business, and sat quietly listening and observing those who came in for their mail and for groceries. Mr. Lane was on his own resources now. The stage driver had



stayed in Vale only long enough to feed and water his horses before continuing on the route that led to Turkville and Mendota. He was a new man on the job and he hadn't known where Mr. Lane could find board and room or someone who would let him have a horse or a team and buggy to take him around on his business.

Mr. Lane was an observant man and a patient one and he found a certain quiet satisfaction in watching the people who came into the store. He also noted the geraniums in bloom on the window ledges, the shining cleanness of the store and the orderly arrangement of goods on the shelves. Finally, his eyes came to rest on Janie who, with quiet efficiency was weighing and measuring groceries, cutting off lengths of yard goods, and answering Daddy's questions as to where he would find this and that and where had she put something else or other.

"That's a damned good looking woman," Mr. Lane told himself, "I wonder what she's doing in a little joint like this? In a country where women are at a premium, she surely isn't that old man's wife." Mr. Lane felt that he couldn't bear the thought and decided he must learn at once who Janie was. So he sauntered over to the candy counter and waited until she was free to sell him what he wanted.

The store was nearly empty now; Daddy had come out from behind the post office section and Mr. Lane thought he

could spend a little time getting his surroundings and perhaps making arrangements for the business he had on hand. He chose a pound of hard candy and remarked,

"This is a nice little store you have here, Mrs. ----," he hesitated and Janie said,

"Mrs. Jarrett."

Mr. Lane was nearly bowled over and for the moment he was left speechless. It couldn't be, he thought. How could it be? Well, anyway she wasn't the old man's wife. The stage driver had said the old man's name was Harl and now he had learned that she was Mrs. Jarrett. He had to get to the bottom of this and it couldn't be too soon.

"Uh-well-I wonder if you folks could put me up for the night and give me my meals for a day or two while I attend to some business in the neighborhood. There's some land I want to see about and I'll need a team and buggy or a horse to take me around. The stage driver said you folks could probably help me out."

The request had been made to Janie, but before answering she turned to Daddy Harl and allowed him to make the decision.

"Why yes, we can put you up for a few days, can't we, Janie? There's a coupla rooms upstairs where we lodge people sometimes and Janie can get your meals for you. She's a good cook, too. Best in the country. Cooks just like her

grandmother and she was the best there ever was. Yep, she was. We always have supper at six Mr.--- what did you say your name was? Lane?"

Janie would not have kept the man overnight or given him his meals, if she had been left to her own decision, but she knew that Daddy liked to take in a few dollars whenever he could by lodging and boarding people who came to the community on business.

"They ain't much loose cash money floatin' around this country," the old man would explain, "and I figger I'd just as well have it as ennybody. If you'll do the work, I'll half up with ye, Janie. That oughta be fair enough."

"We'll be murdered in our beds and robbed of the store money some night," Janie warned him, "let somebody keep strangers that doesn't have cash around the place." But the old man could not resist the lure of a dollar and would keep anybody who looked as though he could pay for his board and lodging.

As Janie prepared supper, she could hear Daddy in the store telling the stranger about the people and the country surrounding Vale. Finally the stranger asked if there were any large ranches near the town and Daddy told him about various ones. It was when Daddy began describing the Circle C and Jason that Mr. Lane evinced the most interest. Janie noted that he put some leading questions and that Daddy



answered them garrulously and at last launched into a tirade against Jason.

Janie listened with pursed lips while the old man denounced Jason roundly and told how he had acquired his land and his property, how he had committed bigamy, and how he had refused to support Janie and her children.

Janie was angry and embarrassed when she called the two men in to supper and scarcely touched the food on her plate. Excusing herself before the meal was finished, she went upstairs to put fresh linen on the bed and to see that the room was ready for Mr. Lane. Mr. Lane had already taken his belongings upstairs and Janie saw that his overcoat was of fine worsted material and that his valise was of an expensive make. A brief case of fine calf grain leather lay on the bed and when Janie picked it up she saw on the under side the name "People's Insurance Company" in gold letters.

Janie had never heard of the People's Insurance Company, but suddenly she remembered how Mr. Lane had hung on every word Daddy had told him about Jason and fear gripped her heart. She had no idea what the insurance company could do with Jason, but prison was her first thought.

"Not prison for Jason, oh please God, no," she prayed, "he would die shut away from the world, from the wind and the sun and the stars." The bedroom was at the end of the long room used for a dance hall and she looked through the door

into the hall and remembered dancing with Jason before they were married. She thought of the miles they had ridden together over the long trails from one cattle camp to another, the nights they had slept in the open with the stars shining down upon them, and knew that she had to do something to save Jason from prison.

When Janie came downstairs, the two men and the children had finished eating. The twins were tired and after the dishes were washed Janie put them to bed. Daddy's rheumatism always bothered him of evenings when the weather became cool and tonight he was in some pain and not so talkative as he had been earlier in the day. Mr. Lane started two or three conversations with Janie and finding her noncommittal lapsed into silence. Finally Daddy announced that he was going to bed and asked Janie to tend the store until nine o'clock. Mr. Lane said that he was tired from his long ride and inquired at what time breakfast would be ready. Janie lighted a lantern for him to see his way up the stairs, wished him a pleasant good night and sat in the store until the sound of the bed's creaking told her that Mr. Lane had retired for the night.

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Janie was not a stealthy person and it seemed to her that she bumped into everything in the bedroom as she slipped

in to see that the twins were all right and to take her cape from the peg where it hung at the foot of the bed. She prayed silently over her children, placed her hand on each tousled head for a second, pulled the covers over their shoulders, and left the room.

"I surely won't be gone more than an hour and a half," she assured herself as she slipped out the kitchen door and paused a moment to see if anyone stirred within the building.

Catching one of the horses in the corral was an easy matter, saddling him was another, and soon Janie was leading the horse down Mill Street, so called because the flour mill was situated here at the furthest west side of town and the mill race gurgled along beside it.

Janie thought, and prayed, that everyone in Vale was indoors this cool October evening as she led Babe to the south end of town where Main Street and Mill Street came together to form the trail that led eastward toward the Circle C.

When she was free of the town, she felt safe from detection and pulling Daddy's old black felt hat down farther on her head, she mounted Babe and spurred him into a trot. The horse was hard riding and she thought longingly of Jason's singlefooting saddle horses that she had loved to ride in happier days.

When she started out, Janie had felt that there was



no question but what she must give Jason warning that Mr. Lane and the insurance company were on his trail, but as she approached the ranch, doubts and misgivings assailed her. The house was dark; perhaps Jason wasn't even there. Well, then she would arouse Joe or Tommy and leave a note with him to give Jason. Perhaps he would be angry with her and think that it was presumptuous of her to meddle in his affairs.

"Well anyway, I'm doing what I consider best for Jason and for the children," she told herself. But she wanted to turn Babe's head back toward Vale. "If I were Jason," she thought, "I would bluff my way through this, knowing that whatever I did was right. But I'm not Jason, I don't have his assurance, and I'm probably doing the wrong thing entirely."

She halted Babe at the hitch rack and sat for a moment contemplating the great bulk of the house that loomed massively against the dark sky. Always before a prideful possessiveness had filled her soul when she surveyed the house, but tonight a deep loneliness pervaded her thoughts. Ghosts of remembered happiness rose to mock her, and with difficulty she choked back a sob.

"I almost wish I hadn't come and I do hope Jason isn't here. I can get Joe or Tommy up and send him with a warning," she thought optimistically as she dropped from Babe's back

and tied his reins securely to the hitch rack.

Just then Shep gave a loud bark of welcome and bounded toward her from his bed on the back porch. The dog was overwhelmed with happiness at seeing her and leaped up and down with short, sharp, joyful barks.

"Oh Shep!" she said, petting the dog, "the boys have missed you so. Every day they wonder how you are."

"Who's there? Who is it?" Jason demanded authoritatively from the kitchen door, "that you, Joe?"

"It's not Joe," Janie assured him coming closer.

"One of the boys sick? What's the matter?" There was near panic in Jason's voice.

Janie walked to the porch steps and said, "There's something I thought you ought to know, Jason, but I don't want to shout. Come on out on the porch."

"Come into the kitchen while I get some clothes on."

"But I don't have that much time. The boys are asleep and Daddy doesn't know that I'm gone. If they should wake up, he'd probably start a search for me."

"They won't wake up. Come on in and build up the fire. Put the coffee on and warm it up. I'll get dressed and you can tell me what's on your mind."

Reluctantly Janie walked into the kitchen, lighted a lamp, and looked around. The room was not as spotless as it had been in Mrs. Sprague's day, true enough, but it was

better than most bachelor's quarters at that. She placed some small sticks of kindling on the coals in the range and set the coffee pot forward on a front lid. When Jason came out a few minutes later, the smell of coffee pervaded the air and Janie stood shivering by the fire.

"What is it?" he asked gently thinking that he had hardly expected to ever see her in this familiar room again.

"There's a man staying all night up at the store, a Mr. Lane, and on his brief case is the name of the People's Insurance Company."

Jason's face remained impassive. "And that's what you came down here to tell me?"

"Yes, I thought you should know. Be prepared. He told Daddy he was out here to see about some land, but he seemed surprised when he found out my name and he acted interested when Daddy mentioned you."

"I see. Huldy has talked too much. Someone has written to the insurance company. Well, I'm in the clear. She's the one who will have to face the music."

"In other words, you mean you're going to let her face it."

"I simply mean that they have nothing on me. If she collected insurance illegally, she will have to pay it back."

"And that's all they can make her do, pay it back?"

"I think that's right. She'll have to pay it back."



"But she hasn't any money. Has she? Didn't she spend it all on land?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what she did with the money I gave her, but I do know that she didn't keep her word and she's got all she'll ever get from me---regardless."

"Jason, that sounds pretty hard and cruel."

"This is a hard, cruel world, my girl. At least I've found it so to date."

"I guess there's no question about that."

"None at all. Have a cup of coffee and thanks for your interest in my affairs." Jason's tone was slightly sarcastic. Janie's manner implied plainly, to him at any rate, that she considered him guilty of some dishonesty in connection with the insurance and he was nettled.

Janie was sorry now that she had come. Apparently she had only angered Jason and given him a chance to mock her. She stood, a small dejected figure in her shoulder cape with Daddy's old black, wide brimmed felt hat set a little rakishly on her head.

Jason poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. "Here, drink this," he said a little brusquely, "and I'll saddle Patch and ride back with you."

"No. I came down here alone; I can go back the same way. How will it look for you and me to come riding into Vale together?"

"So far as I'm concerned, it will look perfectly all right. Nothing unusual about it. What's this I hear about you and Sid White?"

Janie set her cup on the table, the coffee unfinished. "I didn't come down here to quarrel with you, Jason, certainly," she said in a strained voice, "I'll be going now and I can't see that what I do is any concern of yours. So far as I know, you're living your life the way you please and I can't see any reason why I shouldn't do the same. It's not any part of my business to turn customers away from the store and if there's been gossip, it's just something more that I have to endure."

"There hasn't been any gossip," Jason lied gallantly, "I merely mentioned it because I want you to remember that I'm going to get all of this straightened out pretty soon and you and I are going to start our lives over again-- together."

"You're surer of that than I am, Jason. Don't figure on it too strong."

"If you stay around old man Harl much longer, you'll be just like him," Jason assured her disgustedly, "well, I'll get Patch saddled. You wait here."

"You don't have to go with me," Janie protested, "I got down here all right by myself."

Jason made no answer but went on out to the stable for

Patch. The ride to Vale was made almost in silence. When they came to the south edge of town, Jason reined in his horse and said quietly,

"I'll go on back now. I wish things were different, Janie. God knows I'm trying to get this thing straightened out so we can have our family together again. It was good of you to warn me tonight and I appreciate what you've done. I'm not happy the way I'm living now and I know you're not. I thought last Spring, when I made a settlement with that woman, that by now we could be remarried, but you know how that turned out."

"Yes, I know. But I have never told you, Jason, that I was especially anxious to be re-married and I don't want you to expect it as a certainty. If your intentions are what you say they are, I can't understand why you don't get a divorce from that woman. You certainly have plenty of reason."

"I believe things are going to happen pretty fast from now on and I reckon it's just as well. Good night, Janie, remember what I told you and be waiting for me," Jason answered abruptly and rode on.

The sky was overcast, the town asleep; only a dog barked occasionally or a sleepy bird twittered high overhead in the cottonwoods. Janie entered the living quarters of the store to find everything as she had left it and



heaved a sigh of relief that the children had not awakened.

"I suppose I'll be looking after Jason Jarrett the rest of my life," she thought wearily, "I wonder if he was as unconcerned about that as he appeared to be."

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Mr. Lane had enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at Daddy Harl's. He had praised the buckwheat cakes and the ham lavishly, he had drunk three cups of Janie's near-perfect coffee and then he had borrowed Babe and set forth for the Circle C in high good humor with the pleasant anticipation of surprising Jason and forcing him into an admission of guilt.

But if Jason was surprised, he hid the fact nicely. He parried Mr. Lane's questions neatly giving smooth, suave answers and altogether maintained the appearance of a man who is innocent of all wrong, who wants to be helpful, yet feels he must shield an erring woman as much as possible. He had acted his part so well that Mr. Lane was practically convinced that Jason had had no part in defrauding the People's Insurance Company.

Now Mr. Lane was riding along the trail that followed the river and led toward Huldy's house. Things were not turning out as he had supposed they would when he had set out that morning. He had supposed that Jason, taken wholly

by surprise, would blurt out the truth and that he would be only too glad to accept the company's offer of letting him off by paying back the ten thousand dollars with interest at ten per cent compounded semi-annually.

Jason had practically laughed in his face. "Not a dime," he had said, "not one dime. I never saw a cent of that money and I won't return one red cent of it."

"Then why did you give your wife six thousand dollars last Spring?" Mrs. Lane had wanted to know.

"That was a property settlement. Being a woman, she wasn't satisfied that I had left her the place in Illinois and what chattel property there was. She had to have a part of what I had made out here. She wanted it in cash and I gave it to her with the understanding that she was to go away and leave me in peace. And that's what I expect you to do, Mr. Lane, let me alone and tell your company to call off their dogs."

"I underestimated the fellow," Mr. Lane thought testily, "but who would have thought you'd find a man like that on a ranch in this forsaken part of the world? It wouldn't be much use to sue him, either. With a good lawyer he could take care of himself on the witness stand and a corporation would have no chance with a jury. Besides, we haven't got a shred of evidence against him. Well, I wonder what his wife will be like? Women are pretty easy to scare,

though, because they don't know their rights."

If Mr. Lane was counting on the surprise element in Huldy's case, his satisfaction should have been unbounded. When he arrived at her door and announced summarily that he was from the People's Insurance Company, her self-confidence sank to zero. However, the years she had spent with Jason had taught her that silence can furnish a gestation period for ideas. She allowed Mr. Lane to launch into his diatribe against her for defrauding the insurance company and it was only when he told her that she would have to return the money or face prison that she made her accusation against Jason.

"You'll have to get the money out of my husband," she told him, "he's the one that hatched up the idea and then came back and got the money."

"All of it?" Mr. Lane wanted to know.

"No, not all of it. Six thousand dollars it was. He was supposed to go west and set up a home and then send for me."

"And he never sent for you? But when he divided the money the way he did, didn't you feel that you might never hear from him again?"

"It never entered my mind, or I wouldn't have give him a cent of it, you can bet your life," Huldy answered with finality.



"Doesn't it occur to you, Mrs. Cummins, that the very fact that you are here in the same neighborhood with your husband, who is supposed to be dead, constitutes a very damning circumstance?"

"What I want to know, is how the company found out about all this," Huldy blurted.

"That's an easy question to answer. We received a letter postmarked at Fort Hays from a man signing himself James Fisher who said he lived near Vale and that you and your husband were both residents of the community. He said there were rumors to the effect that the two of you had perpetrated an insurance fraud and that, as a decent citizen, he felt you should be reported and prosecuted for it. Are you acquainted with Mr. Fisher?"

"No, I ain't ever heard of anyone by that name, but then I only come out here last Spring."

"Well, Mrs. Cummins, the thing is, will you repay the money, or does the company have to bring suit?"

"Why, I ain't got any money, hardly any at all. I can't pay it back. You'll have to get it out of Jason."

"But he declares he will not pay it, and so far as I can see there isn't any proof that he ever returned for any of the money. We investigated that angle thoroughly before I came out here, I can assure you. It is now a little past the middle of October, the company will give you until the

second week in November to make repayment. If the money isn't repaid in full by that time, we will have to bring criminal proceedings against you."

"But I can't raise that much money in that short a time."

"You'll have to. Get it from your husband, borrow it on your land and livestock, get it however you can, but get it you must. And good-day for now. I'll be around to see you again soon and find out what progress you're making."

Mr. Lane was as good as his word. It seemed to Huldy that almost any time she looked out the window, she could see him riding in on Babe. He was always polite, but insistent, about reminding Huldy that each passing day left one less for her to raise the money that she owed the insurance company. And, Huldy thought, it could not be entirely the prompting of a generous nature that inspired him to leave small gifts each time he came: blotters, a wall calendar, a desk calendar, stationery, advertising folders, and all inscribed with the insignia of the People's Insurance Company.

Though Huldy would have disputed the fact, Mr. Lane did not confine all his activities to her behalf. He visited practically every farm and ranch in the vicinity on the pretext of being interested in buying land and at each place he asked what he considered leading questions about Huldy and Jason and, inadvertently, Janie.

Out of the conflicting opinions he gathered, a pattern finally evolved and Mr. Lane came to realize that Jason was not well liked in the community and that, except for a few close friends such as Doc Hale among the ranchers, he had no intimates. It was generally conceded that Janie had been badly used and that she ought either to sue Jason for everything he had or put him in prison for the rest of his life. As to Huldy, people for the most part agreed that she lived with Aaron Arnold, that she did his housework for nothing, that he had filched her money from her and that he had a mortgage on her land and kept her in line by threatening to foreclose on her. She was a fool, they said, empty headed as a goose and fully as amoral. Of the lot, Janie appeared to be the only one fit to live in a decent community among upright, God-fearing people. It was the men with whom Mr. Lane had talked and who had given him these opinions. The women might have had something else to say.

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Janie, alone most of the time with Daddy and the little boys, felt that she hadn't a friend in the world. When she waited on customers, she was reserved and polite in a dignified, businesslike manner that did not invite confidences and she no longer attended Sunday school or church fearing that she would be snubbed and slighted. Jason never came



near the store these days and she knew he wouldn't so long as Mr. Lane stayed there. And Mr. Lane came more and more to remind her of a vulture with his long, bony frame encased in its habitual black and with his thick glasses setting athwart his high-bridged nose.

"I'll be eternally thankful when that man is gone," she told herself each day hoping that it might be the last for Mr. Lane, "the way he keeps eyeing me is tiresome and disgusting. I feel like he thinks that I know the truth about who got the money and that I ought to return it."

Mr. Lane had no such thought, but the idea, born of desperation, was filtering into Huldy's mind. And one day, garbed in the clothes she had bought at Fort Hays and feeling well dressed and fully within her rights, she sailed into the store and broached the subject to Janie. Embarrassed, and somehow humiliated, Janie listened while Huldy poured out a volley of invective and demanded that she force Jason into repaying the money.

"He took that money, six thousand dollars of it," she ranted, "and he come out here and built up that ranch and instid of sendin' for me, like he said he would, he married you; or ennyway he took up with you and I suppose you thought you was married. Well, ennyhow he kept you in luxery for ten years. You had a hired girl, you had a woman to take care of your young uns, you never lifted a finger to do

ennything harder than to feed yourself. You lived in the best house in the country, you was away up in society. And look at me. Deserted by the man I helped get that money. And now the insurance people say that they'll send me to prison, if I don't pay it back. And Jason Cummins has snuck out of the hull thing. Swears that he don't know nothin' about it a tall and that I hatched up the idea and got all the money. Now what I say is that you profited more from the money than I did and that you've got to make Jason pay back the insurance company."

"You may have noticed," Janie remarked with as much calmness as she could muster, "that Jason isn't an easy person to force into doing things, even when he knows he's wrong. As you doubtless know, he can be very stubborn at times."

"Yes, I know all that," Huldry retorted, "he's as bull headed as a billy goat; but there has to be some way to get that money out of him and the way I see it, you're the one that's got to do it. You got a lot more out of him than I ever did, livin' down there in the lap of luxury with hired help all over the place."

"I'm not upholding Jason, understand, in anything he's done," Janie told the woman reasonably, "but it seems to me that you've had your share of the money. Didn't you get four thousand dollars to start with, and didn't Jason pay you

six thousand this Spring? Of course, I'm not positive that these figures are accurate, but that's the gossip that's going 'round. And most of it has come through Mr. Arnold, I might add. He seems to be an authority on your affairs." Janie could not forbear the gibe.

"Just leave Aaron Arnold out of this," Huldy blustered, "and remember, if there's any way I can put Jason Cummins in prison, I'm goin' ta do it." She had thought she could frighten Janie into a panic and perhaps she would divulge some information that would be helpful. It was hard to believe that Janie could have lived with Jason all those years without his having let something slip in the way of information about what she considered his double dealing.

"You're just as guilty as he is," she continued now thoroughly warmed up, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself livin' with a married man all them years and then helpin' defend him against his legal wife when she tries to get her just dues. I'm goin' to bring you into this, too."

"That's enough, Woman," roared Daddy, entering the store from the kitchen, "you can't talk to Janie like that. I've been listenin' to your caterwaulin' long enough. Get out of here and don't come back. We don't have to put up with the likes of you."

Huldy departed swearing vengeance against Jason, Janie, and the whole world in general.



She had to pass Arnold's house on her way home. Might as well stop and get dinner for him. It wasn't often that Aaron got to see her dressed up in her Sunday best. This would be a treat. A strange team and surrey were in the back yard. There was no way that Huldry could have known that Arnold's sister and her husband from Nebraska had come for a visit and that they had stopped for his mother-in-law, Faith, and the children and that all of them were in the house visiting.

It was a most inopportune time for Huldry to walk in with her usual air of owning the place. When she entered the sitting room, a dead silence fell on the group of visitors and Arnold, with a face black as a thundercloud, rose and led her back into the kitchen.

"What do you mean?" he demanded savagely. "What are you trying to do, make a fool out of yourself and me, too? Get out and stay out. I'm sick and tired of the sight of you."

Huldry was crushed; she had loved Aaron Arnold. She still loved him, but his words had carried a certain finality that she could not ignore. She would never dare go back to his house unless he came and asked her to do so. Perhaps he would do that in a few days. Hope would not lie prostrate for long. But she had thought that Aaron would help her raise the money she needed so desperately, and the time was growing

perilously short. Jason was her last resort; she would go to the Circle C and demand that he help her out of her predicament. After she had stopped at home and eaten something, she would feel better, surely.

The prospect at home was not designed to sharpen Huldy's appetite appreciably. On the best chair in the house sat Mr. Lane diligently plying Oral with what he considered leading questions. When the insurance investigator rode into the yard on Babe and found Huldy away, the thought presented itself that here was an opportunity to learn as much as possible from the boy who was obviously of less than average intelligence.

Mr. Lane felt that Oral had given him honest enough answers to all his interrogating, but he had learned nothing new that could be considered incriminating against either Huldy or Jason. In fact, the boy knew only what he had heard his mother repeat again and again in his childish ears, and Mr. Lane had heard the story so often that it made him weary just to think of it.

Huldy in her present mood, would have liked nothing better than to boot Mr. Lane out the door and down the hill into the river. Instead she proceeded to cook an uninspired meal that gave the man indigestion for the rest of the day and turned his thoughts longingly toward home. Mr. Lane wondered plaintively how a woman could prepare food so

carelessly. It was the first time he had known that potatoes could be spoiled by the simple process of stewing them in a pan. But part of the soil that the potatoes had grown in formed a thick scum that clung unappetizingly to their surfaces and made him want to gag. The meat was greasy, the biscuits had too much soda in them, and the gravy was little better than a mass of lumps.

Mr. Lane left soon after the meal was ended, but not before he had presented Huldry with another new calendar, its leaves turned conspicuously to the month of November. When he was well out of hearing, Huldry shoved the calendar in the stove and went into the yard where she cursed long and loudly in his direction until he dropped out of sight among the trees along the river.

"I wisht his horse would fall on him and break his neck," she told Oral when she went back into the house. "I wisht there was enough water in the river to drownd him. I wisht he was in hell with his throat cut and his back broke, and a million leeches suckin' his blood." She sat down heavily at the cluttered table and sighed deeply.

"I was goin' down to see your paw this afternoon, Oral, but I reckon this ain't the day for it; and he probably wouldn't be around the house anyway. I'm sick and tired to the marrer of my bones, but we'll have to get some wood in. Winter's comin' on. Have you noticed, nearly all the leaves



are off the trees?"

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"Well, what's your story this time?" Jason was eyeing Huldý distastefully as she stood before him in the early morning light.

"Jason, you've got to help me. I couldn't sleep all night and I come down early so's to ketch you afore you went out to work. That man is drivin' me crazy. He comes nearly every day now and reminds me that there's only a few days left fer me to pay back the insurance money and he tells me how the company can send me to prison fer the rest of my life. He says that you've got the money and I have to get it frum you, or else he'll put me in the pen."

"The truth of the matter," Jason said slowly, "is that I don't have that much money. Not after paying you what I did last spring. Now I've told you before and I'm telling you again, that I'm not going to admit to ever getting any of that insurance money and I'm not going to pay it back to save your hide. If you had kept your agreement with me, this would never have happened. You could have taken your money and gone where you pleased; but no, you stayed here to devil me and look what you've got yourself into. Now get out of it the best way you can."

"Well, the way I'm goin' to get out of it is to leave

here," Huldý blustered, "I'm goin' to pick up and go in the night and then you and Mr. Lane can figger out what to do between you."

"That sounds just like you," Jason told her, "and of course, you're so smart nobody will ever be able to track you down. But it's no affair of mine. I'm in the clear; I made sure of that. If Lane could hang anything on me, he would have done it long before now, you can be sure. That's why he's stayed around here and kept working on you; he thought you'd get the money out of me and turn it over to him."

"We was in that insurance deal together, Jason Cummins, you're just as guilty as I am, and look how we come out. You with all the property you've got and me with nothin'." Huldý surveyed the ranch buildings slowly, "As Paw used to say, there ain't no justice in this world. But anyway, I've got partly even with you. I put a quietus on that marriage of yours and it'll be a good long while before you get Miss Janie down here agin, or I miss my guess. She's as free as the birds and can marry anybody she pleases. Hed you ever thought of that?"

"Yes, I've thought of it plenty of times these past months. Where I made my mistake was in ever believing anything you ever said. You couldn't tell the truth, if you had to. But I was young in those days and didn't know there

were women like you in the world."

"Oh yes, you come from sech a good family! I've heard all about 'em often enough. The women in your family was all angels and butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. Too bad you couldn't have been somethin' like 'em. Well, all right, "Mr. Jarrett," you won't help me, so I'm clearin' out and there's nothin' you can do about it." Huldy waited a moment for Jason's reaction, but he merely answered, "No, there's nothing I can do about it. In fact, there isn't anything I want to do," and walked away to the stable leaving Huldy standing there in the cold November wind.

When she reached home, Oral was shivering in front of the fire he had built in the kitchen stove.

"My gosh Ma! Where was you? When I woke up you was gone and I looked all over fer you. Where've you been?"

"I had some business to see about," Huldy answered him absently, "you go milk the cow while I get breakfast. After we eat, I've got some work for you to do."

When breakfast was over, Huldy told the boy, "Now Oral, I want you to help me pack up some things in the bedroom. Not here in the kitchen, mind you, but in the bedroom so's if anybody comes, they can't tell what we're doin'."

"Maw, you mean we're really leavin'?' You mean you meant it when you said we was goin'?' We'll have to get in



a wagon agin and start travelin'?"

"Why yes, Oral, fer a while we will. I aim to start out northeast to some city, maybe Omaha, and live there fer a while."

"But my gosh, Maw, that must be a long ways to go in a wagon in the winter."

"All right now, Oral. I don't aim to go the whole ways in a wagon. When we get up in Nebraska to the railroad, we'll sell the wagon and horses and take the train the rest of the ways. Maybe we'll go to Chicago. But anyhow, we're gettin' out of here. If that Lane man comes on this place another time, I'm gonna start screamin' and I don't think I'll ever stop."

"But why can't we go to Fort Hays and take th' train?"

"And have Lane come right after us? It'd be just the thing he'd expect us to do. No, we're goin' to Nebraska. Now you shut up and get them boxes packed ready to put in the wagon soon's it gets dark."

In the early dusk of the November evening, Huldý got the horses ready while Oral packed their belongings in the wagon. It was dark when they set out and Oral said to his mother,

"Maw, I sure wisht you'd waited a day or two. I feel it in my bones that we're headin' into a storm. Just look at them clouds."

"I can't wait any longer. Day after tomorrer is the day that Lane devil says I have to have the money ready. I'd like to see his face when he comes over here and finds us gone!"

"Yeah, I would too; but I think we oughta wait. I think it's gonna storm."

"Oh, you never can think of but one thing at a time, Oral. Just fergit about the storm."

Perhaps Oral had some sixth sense that was denied his mother. Of course, he was not driven by her unheeding desperation; but at any rate, his prediction about the weather proved correct. It was well past midnight, and Huldy thought that the horses were making unusually good time, when the blizzard howled out of the northwest, bore down upon them, and raged across the treeless plain, leaving destruction in its wake.

"My gosh, Maw, it looks like we're in fer it sure," Oral shouted to his mother above the roar of the wind.

With a confidence she was far from feeling, Huldy tried to reassure the boy, "The horses'll find their way, all right, Oral. I'm gonna give 'em their heads now and let 'em go where they want to. Horses are smart in a storm; they'll take us to shelter."

Huldy refused to admit that she had lost her bearings and couldn't guide the team. But the very suddenness, the

fury of the storm had confused her.

To Huldy and the boy, adrift and alone, it seemed that they were floating in space where there was neither up nor down, right nor left. Wave after wave of stinging, biting, death-dealing snow swept around and over them; and roared on in the darkness.

"Maw, I'm freezin' to death," Oral shouted. "I told you it'd blizzard." He was pleased to think that his prediction had come true.

"Well, it's your own fault, if you're cold. If you knowed it was gonna storm, why didn't you put on more wraps? I'm gonna tie the lines to the brake rod now and let the horses find their own way. I can't guide 'em anyhow. We'll get in the back of the wagon till the storm's over."

The horses, eyes frozen shut by the snow, moved aimlessly, their sense of direction gone. But, faithful beasts that they were, they plodded on through the fury of the storm and the trackless depths of the night.

In the back of the wagon, Huldy and Oral crouched among the boxes and bundles that held their belongings. Chilled to the bone, they burrowed under the bedclothes in an attempt to keep out the stinging bite of the cold. The wheels turned on, the wagon sheet snapped in the wind, the two in the wagon were silent.

"Are you asleep, Maw?" Oral finally ventured.



"No. It ought to come daylight pretty soon. We'll be all right then."

"Yeah, we'll be all right then."

Just then the wagon careened perilously, gave a sudden, violent lurch, and Oral and Huldý found themselves in a welter of flailing hooves and what was left of the wagon. The horses had plunged over the steep bank of the Paradise and into the frozen bed of the stream.

When Huldý managed to extricate herself from the wreckage, she found Oral standing dazed and shaken a few feet from her.

"Let's get out of here, Maw," he pleaded, "I can't stand to hear the horses screamin' and lungin' like that. They must've broke every leg they've got, the way it sounds. Come on!"

They walked on up the stream, away from the noise of the horses, until exhaustion forced them to sink down in the snow.

\* \* \*

Billy Graves came stomping into the store, filled with importance and excitement.

"Didja hear about the woman and boy they found froze to death over on the Paradise?" he demanded in his treble voice of Daddy. The old man indicated that he hadn't.

"Well, tell that Lane feller he can quit lookin' fer Mrs. Cummins and her son Oral. A coupla hunters found 'em yesterday down under the crick bank. I was over that way at my brother's and I i--identified 'em. It was them a'right, dead as door nails with their eyes froze open and their tongues ahangin' out!"

Billy stopped a moment to catch his breath and Daddy snapped into action.

"Somebody'll have to let Jarrett know," he decided, "he'll have to pay fer their funerals. No use lettin' the county do it. D' you wanta take Babe and ride down there? Your horse is probably wore out after ridin' him over here in the snow. I ain't ever seen the drifts as deep as they are since I been out here."

When everyone in Vale had been apprised of the news, the town began to seethe. Jason ought to be tarred and feathered and run out of the country, Mr. Lane should be strung up to the highest cottonwood on the river, nothing bad enough could be done to Arnold, and Janie ought to be eternally ashamed of herself because she hadn't helped the woman get any money out of Jarrett. Though how Janie would have accomplished this, nobody explained. Huldys' shortcomings were forgotten and forgiven. She was dead now and only a very few people seemed to remember anything less than her imagined saintly virtues; and these people were promptly

shushed when they opened their mouths.

In the present state of public opinion, Jason decided that the funerals would better not be held in Vale.

"If for no other reason than to keep those damned curiosity hounds over there from being satisfied, I'm going to send their bodies back to Illinois," he told Joe, "you'll take them back and turn them over to the Taylors. They'd want them buried there anyway. We'll send off some telegrams so they'll be ready. But I don't see why the hell they had to die when the drifts are this deep."

Jason was filled with conflicting emotions. It was impossible for him to be sorry that Huldý was dead; yet he felt that the manner of her dying had not raised his stature in Janie's eyes.

"I'll have to wait at least till Spring before I say anything to her about coming back to me," he reflected. "It might be as well to let her stew for a while anyway. I'm free now. Free of Huldý and free of that damned insurance company. For the first time in more than twenty years, I haven't got a thing hanging over my head, and it's a damned good feeling."

Jason was plagued by a desire to know his fate and the fear of learning that Janie had meant it when she said she wouldn't come back to him. So it was March when he felt sure enough of himself to approach her about returning to the



ranch.

Jason, as usual, passed Arnold's farm as he rode into Vale and noted that the place looked a lot better than it had the year before. Arnold had done all right for himself. He'd gotten all the work and all the money he could out of Huldy; and then this winter he'd married the Widow Bent and her section of land. The two farms would, in time, make him prosperous. Arnold would always get along all right; he wasn't inclined to miss the main chance. Though his pride had suffered when Faith Cain finally dismissed him, he seemed content enough with Mrs. Bent and her property.

When Jason stopped his horse in front of the store, Mr. Patton came out and got in his buggy without speaking. Patton was a slick one, sure enough. Look how he'd slipped out of that affair with Maggie Kirby! Talked her into laying the young one onto Lije Barron, the hired man, and before Lije knew what was happening, he was married. Well, Lije wasn't very smart, but he refused to live with Maggie. He simply went to Colorado and hadn't been heard from since. Probably never would be heard of again. But the marriage took the pressure off Patton anyway. Patton's nose would never look the same again. Jason had broken it the time he knocked him down. Well, that was all right. He had it coming to him.

When Jason entered the store, Daddy merely grunted in

"You're not going when everything is settled and we have nothing to worry about! When we can begin our lives all over again with the knowledge that nothing can ever come between us again! Are you serious?"

"I was never more serious in my life, Jason. And this shouldn't be any surprise to you, because I've told you before."

"I expected you to say that a year ago, but certainly not now when everything is settled; when we can be married any day and thumb our noses at the world."

"That seems to be all you ever think of--how you can defy conventions with impunity."

"Now don't get school marmish, please, Janie. I know you've been rehearsing what you'd say to me when I came; but let's not go through all of that. Let's start our lives as though none of this had ever happened."

"I don't feel that I want to live with a man who may turn me out any day without a crumb, as you did just about a year ago."

"But you had no business to leave me the way you did. No man's going to provide for a woman that won't live with him. Don't you know that?"

"Well, I've found it out sure enough, and I don't care for the experience again."

"I suppose you can be pretty cocky. Old Harl's

probably made a deal to leave you the store, if you stay here with him the rest of his life. Well, I'm not going to wait around any longer. I want your answer and I want it now." Jason's temper was getting the better of him.

"You have my answer. I just told you I'm not going back to you, Jason."

"Hell's fire and damnation," Jason swore furiously, "what do you want me to do? Get down on my knees and beg you? What are you up to? Planning to marry someone else? Well, just remember that the day you do is the day I take my boys home with me. And I can do it, too."

"I don't think you can. I'm able to provide for them and that's all the law is interested in--that they don't become a public charge."

"I think I'm going in there and wring that old man's neck. He's put you up to all of this. You didn't used to act this way."

"That was before you treated me the way you did, Jason. I wouldn't feel safe to trust any man again after that."

Jason was furious. "Can't you forget anything?" he almost shouted. Then remembering himself he resumed coldly. "Well, have it your way. But just remember I'm as free as you are. I can do anything I damned well please. I can get married, I can sell the ranch and leave the country, I can



have me a hell of a good time, and you can sit here with Old Man Harl and tend store and make a piddling living for the rest of your life in a community where you'll be talked about as long as you live. You've got my best regards. Good bye," and he walked out the back door with a clanking of boot heels and spur rowels. Soon Janie could hear the sound of his horse's hooves as they clattered down the hard packed trail that led to the Circle C.

Janie leaned her head on her arms and cried with abandon. She wept for all women through the ages who have been disappointed in love, who have been disappointed in marriage, who must pick up the pieces of their lives and go on to the end of existence.